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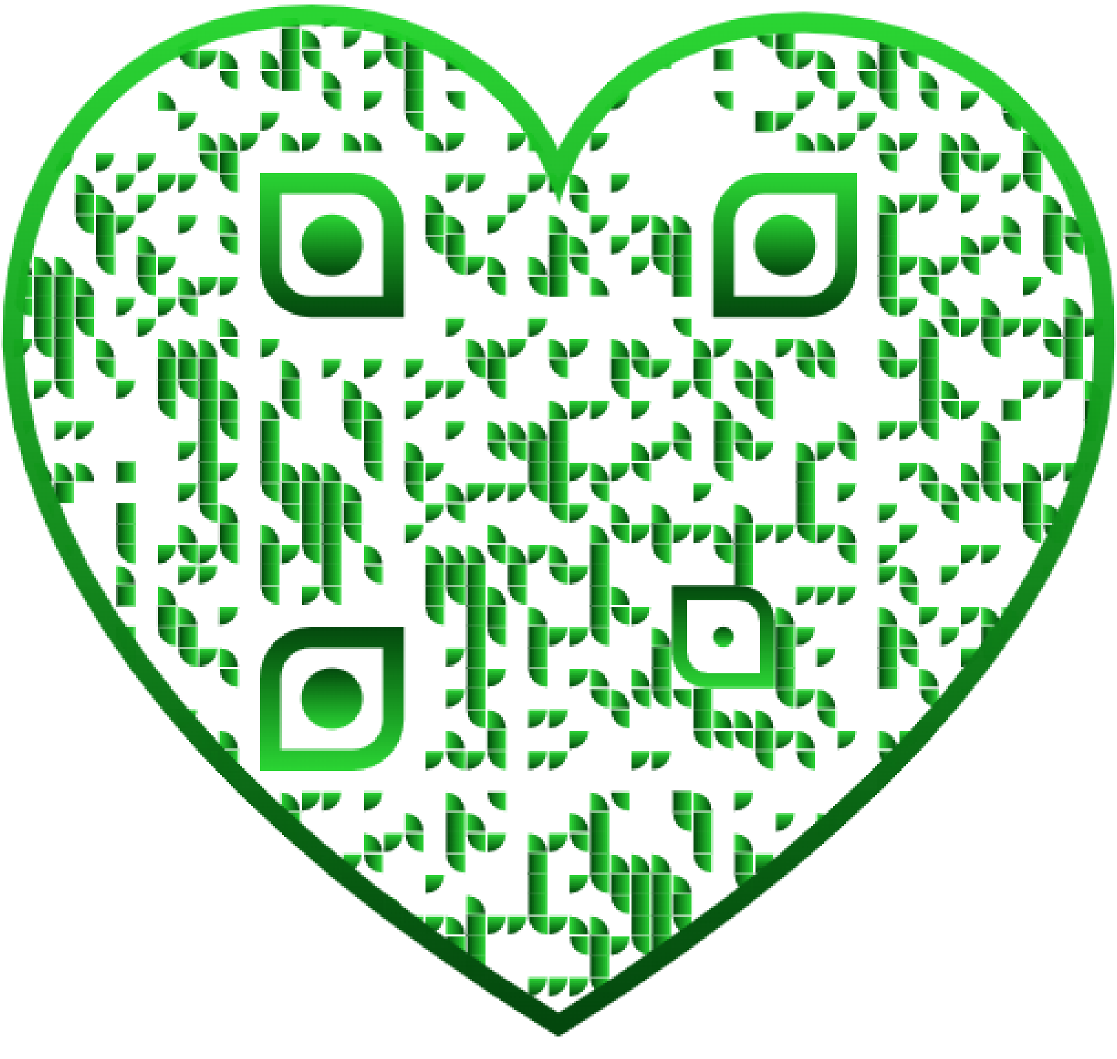
Anglers Journal

A FISHING LIFE

FISH ON THE FLY

- Tarpon in Ascension Bay
- Alaska Steelhead Adventure
- River Rules: Locals Only

REMEMBERING
BOB POPOVICS
& JOHN GIERACH



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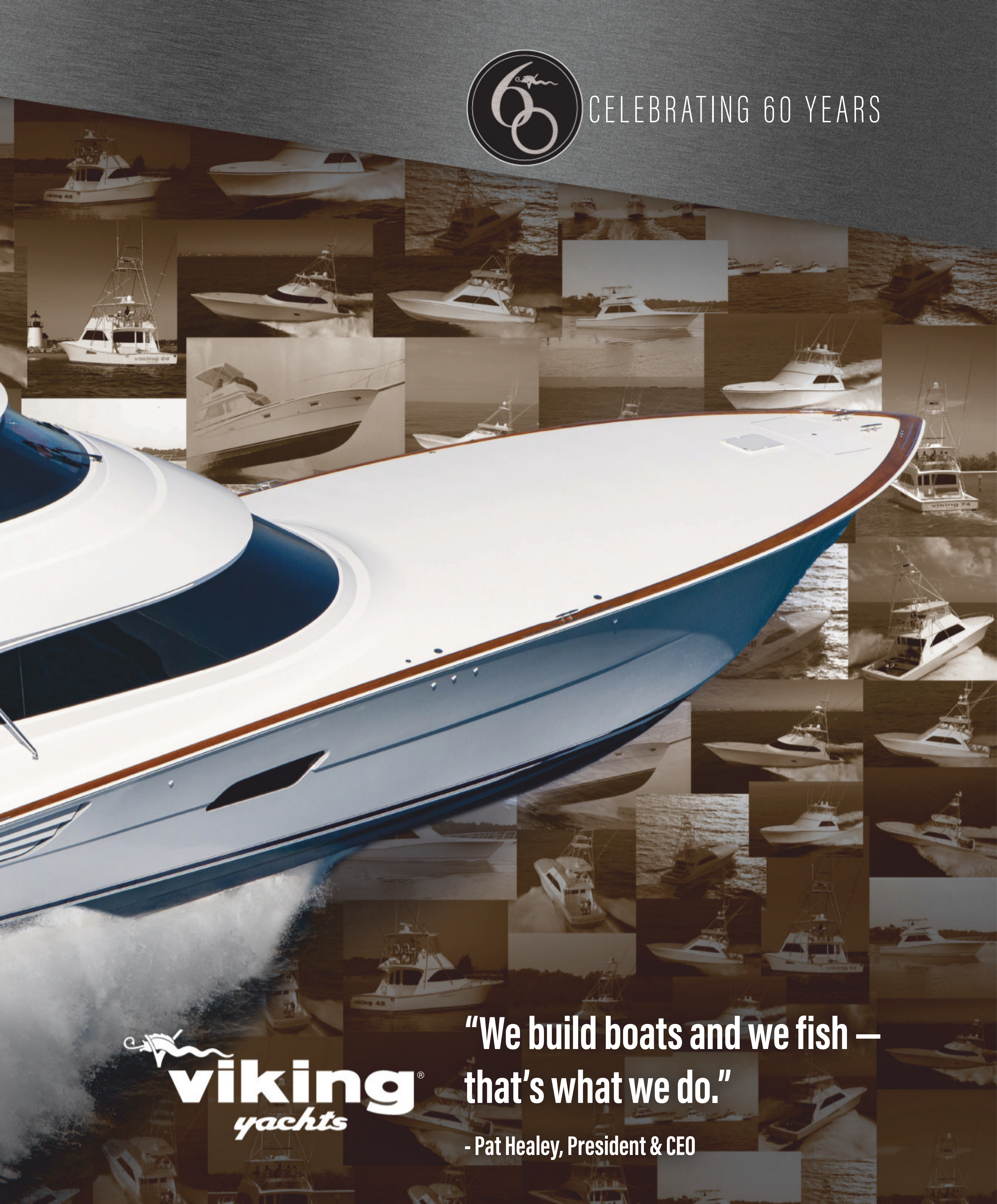
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Blue Marlin in the Spread
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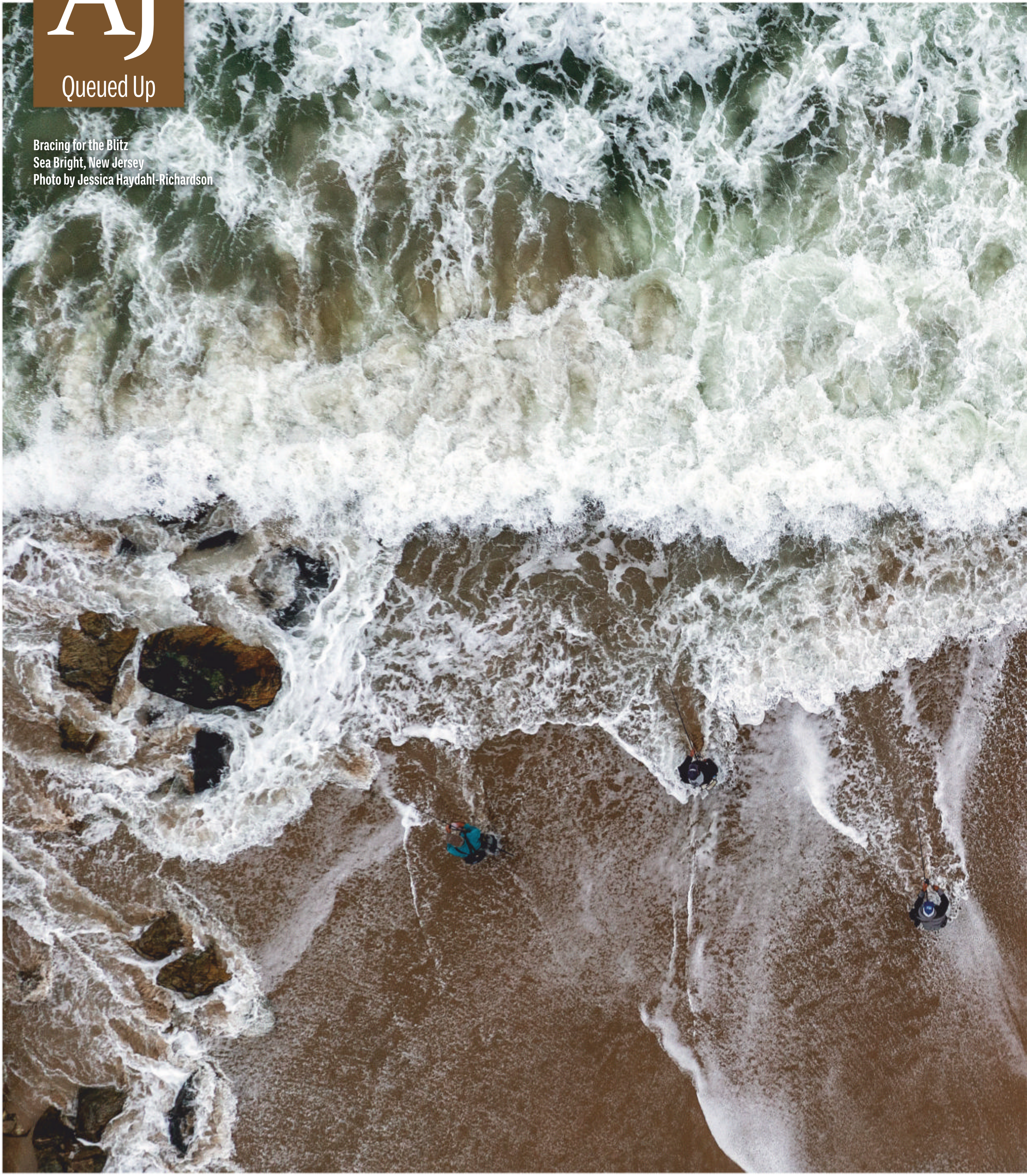
Photo by Harry Hindmarsh

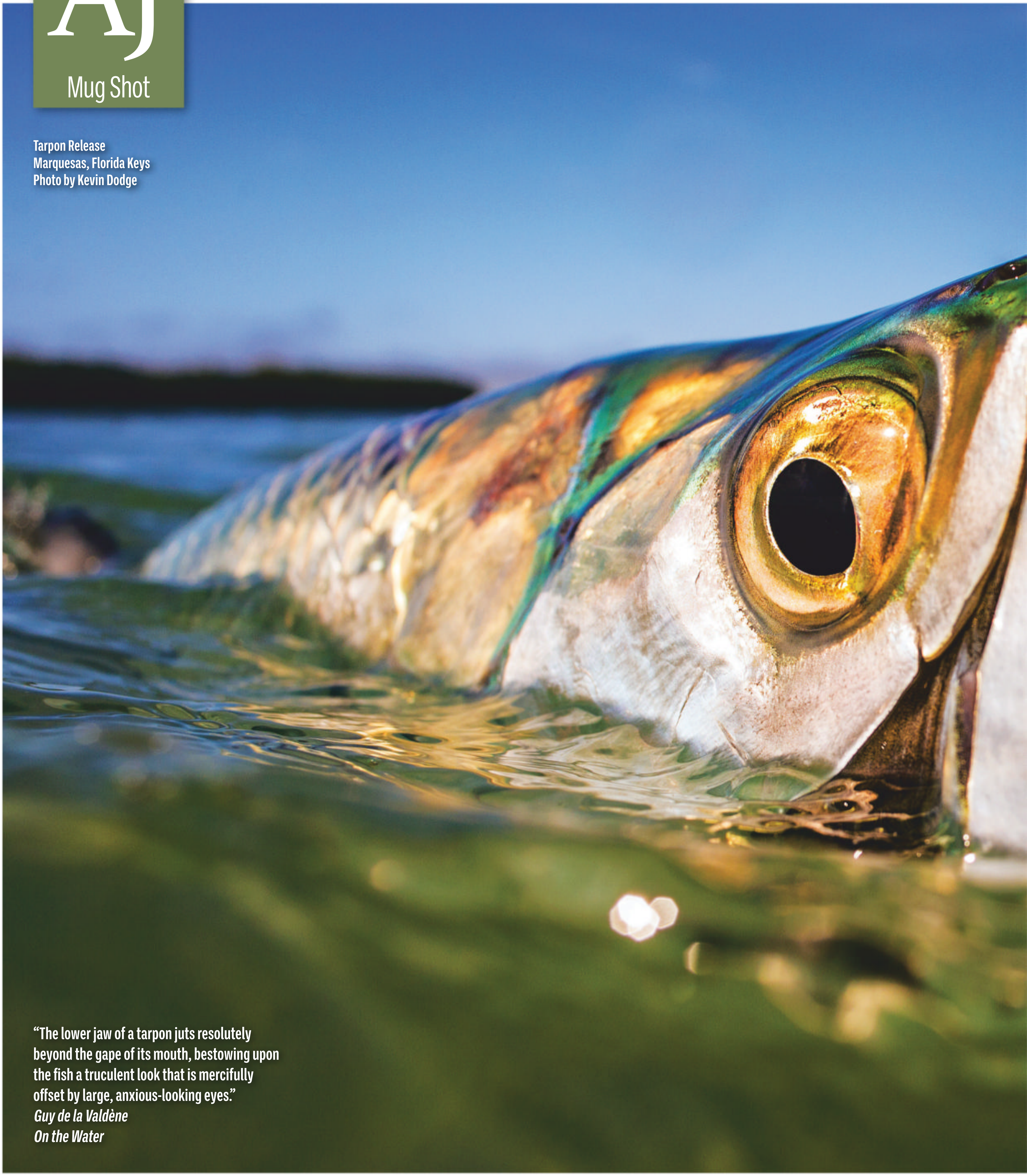
"Adventure followed adventure as I rocketed on. It was that kind of summer."

John Cole
Fishing Came First



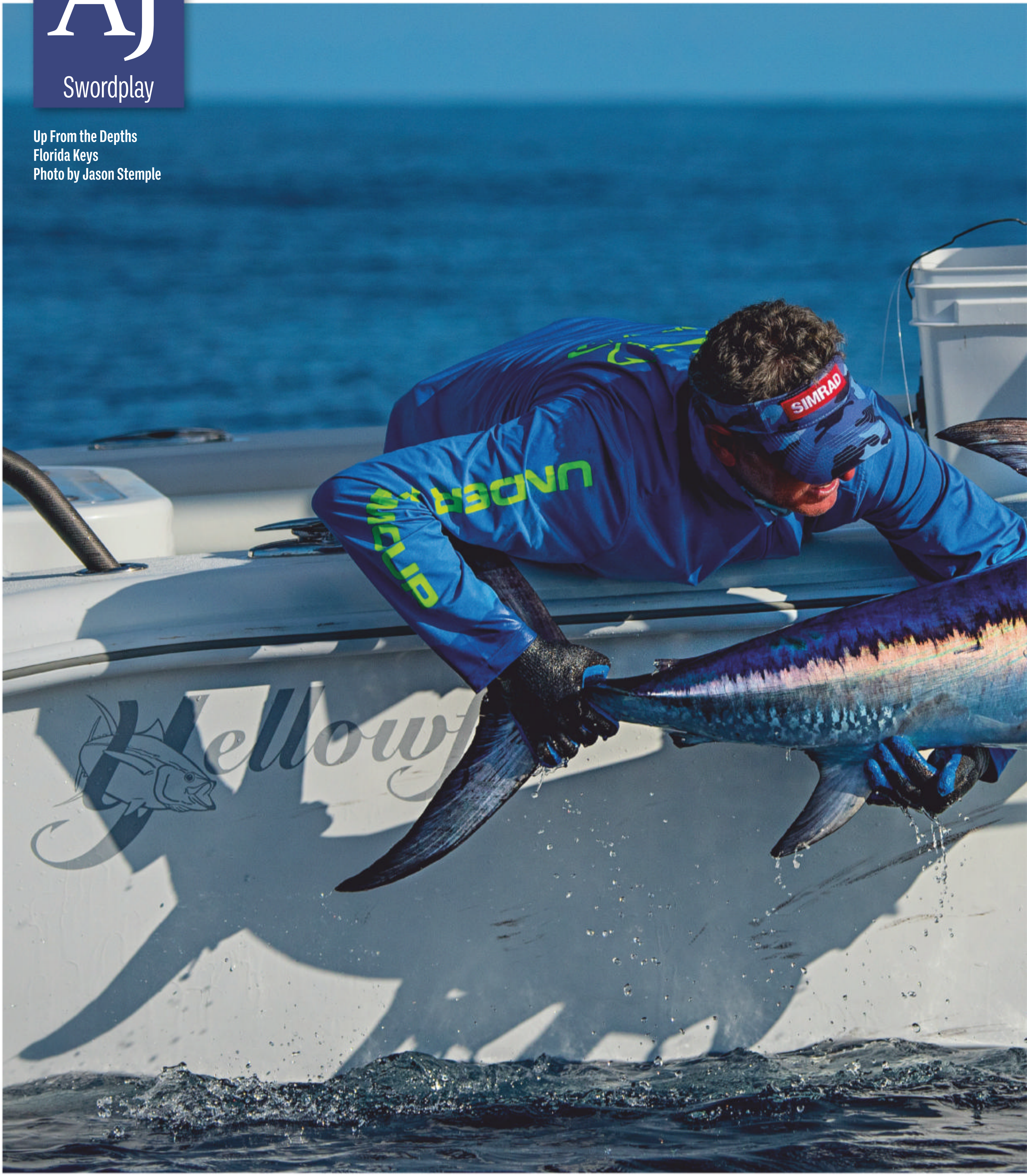
Bracing for the Blitz
Sea Bright, New Jersey
Photo by Jessica Haydahl-Richardson

“If there is an aristocracy of zealots among striped bass fishermen, it is surely made up of those hardy, adventurous souls who tackle the high surf.”
Henry Lyman, Frank Woolner
The Complete Book of Striped Bass Fishing



Tarpon Release
Marquesas, Florida Keys
Photo by Kevin Dodge

"The lower jaw of a tarpon juts resolutely beyond the gape of its mouth, bestowing upon the fish a truculent look that is mercifully offset by large, anxious-looking eyes."
Guy de la Valdène
On the Water



Up From the Depths
Florida Keys
Photo by Jason Stemple

SHIMANO
FSH

"I have only begun to appreciate the strangeness, intelligence, speed, strength and endurance of this king of the sea."
Zane Grey on swordfish, 1920.

Anglers Journal
A FISHING LIFE

"Heavily fished areas have no secret spots, just spots that hold secrets."
Page 62

ON THE COVER
A Florida silver king takes flight.
Photo by Jason Arnold

WINTER 2025
CONTENTS

10 OPENING SPREADS
Stalker, Queued Up, Mug Shot, Swordplay.

22 WEIGHING IN
The decision to ride out Hurricane Milton was filled with anxiety, storm prep, spaghetti-model fatigue, sleepless nights and survivor's guilt. By CHARLIE LEVINE

30 A GIFT OF WHITEFISH
As I walked by a bank of willows, I noticed an irregular quaking that couldn't be wind. The shaking metamorphosed into a dark arm tangled in the branches. By TODD DAVIS

34 IN MEMORIAM
The fishing community is emptier with the passing of *Trout Bum* author John Gierach and fly-tyer Bob Popovics. By CHARLIE LEVINE

36 LATE-SEASON BLITZ
The elements were lining up, but it was a hit-or-miss day of fall fishing along the Jersey Shore. Until it wasn't. By STEPHEN SAUTNER

40 OUT OF THE DUST
Christian Odasso's 1973 film *Tarpon* is a profile of the golden age of Key West fly-fishing in the late 1960s. It was never officially released, but a remastered version will finally circulate the cult classic. By OWEN JAMES BURKE

44 MY BOAT MY LIFE
I was such a fan of the classic, flat-back center consoles I'd come to love in my youth that I decided to buy a mold and jump into boatbuilding with the Atlas Boatworks 23F. By JON DAVIS

JESSICA HAYDAHL-RICHARDSON

27 DUAL CONSOLE

30 EXPRESS

31 DUAL CONSOLE

36 EXPRESS

41 CUSTOM CAROLINA EDITION

45 CAROLINIAN FISH AROUND EXPRESS

53 SPENCER EDITION

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Pat Ford travels the world with cameras and fly rods. "What good are photos if you don't share them," he says. Page 86

PAT FORD

CONTENTS

46 WHERE THE SEA MEETS THE SKY

A trip to Grand Slam Lodge on Ascension Bay in Mexico was like grabbing the brass ring for Corbin Blackford, the winner of the contest celebrating 10 years of *Anglers Journal*.
By CHARLIE LEVINE

54 ALASKA BY MOTHERSHIP

Once Travis Peterson drops anchor on the 56-foot *Adventurous*, his liveaboard clients take to the jetboats to fish for steelhead in the remote southeast Alaska wilderness.
By BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

62 WISDOM OF THE TIDES

Understanding the interrelationship between tide and current is one of the most important factors for angling success, whether fishing from the surf or from a boat.
By ANGELO PELUSO

70 LOCALS ONLY

I surf busy breaks during winter and guide on busy trout streams in Montana during summer. I've noticed numerous similarities between surfing and fly-fishing — politeness counts. By CALLAN WINK

78 FABLED TRUTH

The Gaspé Peninsula area in Quebec is home to some of the world's greatest Atlantic salmon rivers, but it's also home to a unique striped-bass fishery that's on the rebound.
By MICHAEL CARR

86 LIFE ON THE EDGE

Spry and youthful at 81, Pat Ford is among the most accomplished fishermen and photographers, a legacy that began when he was in the Navy, stationed in Key West, more than 50 years ago. By WILLIAM SISSON

96 BETWEEN FISH

It is a gift from the gods to be able to fish yourself into a happy, dazed state of exhaustion. At Jurassic Lake in Patagonian Argentina, that gift comes courtesy of a resident population of enormous rainbow trout.
By WILLIAM SISSON

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WEIGHING IN

By Charlie Levine

We want to hear from you.
Please send your comments to editor-in-chief Charlie Levine at clevine@aimmedia.com.
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Hurricane Anxiety

They always seem to strike in the middle of the night, making their arrival even more demonic — the darkness hiding their face. We hunker down in the center of our home, camping out in the windowless family room. While exhausted from all the prep and the sea of emotions, sleep is impossible. Wind screams against the side of the house. The dog growls and barks as debris from the 100-year-old live oak in our front yard bounces off the roof.

I pace the hallway, stare at my two young sons sleeping on mattresses dragged from their bedrooms and placed on the floor. My wife looks at her phone, her face aglow in blue light. Has the path changed? Is the eye still projected to run over our lives? The storm models look like spaghetti thrown against the wall. I had to stop looking at them. I turned off the television. I couldn't take another second of the men and women standing in the rain wearing parkas, yammering into microphones.

Two weeks before Milton blew past us in central Florida, I was in Dunedin, a quaint beach town on the Gulf of Mexico just north of Clearwater. I was helping a close family friend pull her belongings to the curb. Helene's storm surge flooded her entire neighborhood. Her grown kids and a cadre of friends were reducing her cute, manicured bungalow to the studs. The waterline was halfway up the interior doors and walls. Everything submerged was now trash.

As she tried to dry out photos from her wedding album in the sun, we wheeled appliances, furniture, beds and a life's worth of keepsakes to the growing pile by the street. The dock she was about to renovate was now only a few pilings. A Sea-Doo from God knows where ended up next to her house, waterlogged and too heavy to move. Her gas grill, patio furniture and a shed were chewed into bits and strewn about a once beautiful patio where I've watched the sun sink into the Gulf in a menagerie of orange and pink. What a difference a few days can make.

Seeing her crawl through what was left of her bedroom on her hands and knees, looking for earrings that belonged to her grandmother, was too much to bear. "It's all gone," she said. Couches can be replaced, heirlooms not so much. I wanted to ease her pain but couldn't find the words. Just a sweaty hug.

The devastation Helene wreaked on North Carolina twists my throat into an emotional knot every time I look at the photos and video. I love Asheville. We escaped the Florida heat there this past summer, and went tubing, fishing and panning for gold in the rivers. We fantasized of retiring there one day. We looked at real estate listings. I called my buddy who lives outside Asheville every day after the storm but didn't get through for nearly a week. He was OK, his home spared. "It's a war zone," he said when we finally connected. We were planning a smallmouth bass trip in the area next summer. That trip was the furthest thing from his mind, the rivers still raging, a slew of chocolate milk.

Survivor's guilt overtakes me when we emerge from a storm unscathed. Floridians know what I'm speaking about. If you live in this state long enough, you'll see your share of hurricanes. Milton scared me. The storm blew up to a Category 5 in record time, churning in the warm waters of the Gulf. At one point, winds peaked at 180 mph, pushing the boundaries of what is mathematically possible. Thankfully, its strength diminished before landfall near what is left of Siesta Key.

We made the gut-wrenching call to ride out the storm. These decisions are not taken lightly; they cost you sleep and long hours of internal debate. We prepped as best we could. Waiting in long lines for sandbags, loading up on supplies, making blocks of ice, gassing up cars and cans. There were a few dicey hours as the eyewall went by to our south. Tornado warnings rang loudly on my phone throughout the night, but our home and our lives were left intact.

Hurricane anxiety is no joke, but truthfully, I'm fascinated by storms. The first thing I do when I wake up is look at the weather. Wind, moon, barometric pressure and tide are clues to the oceanic puzzle. Maybe that's part of the reason we often ride it out. To witness it all firsthand. We're also 45 miles from the coast and don't live on a flood plain. But it seems there is no longer such thing as a safe zone, although my buddy in Asheville and I did joke about renting an Airbnb in Arkansas for the remainder of hurricane season.

Living on the coast is a roll of the dice, the price you pay to have the ocean at your fingertips. You plan. You evacuate. You rebuild. You hold your loved ones close. The rest of it is out of your hands.

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AND THE AWARD GOES TO ...

The Winter 2024 issue of *Anglers Journal* won the 2024 Folio: Eddie award for best full issue in the Sports/Recreation category.

Each year, the Folio: Eddie & Ozzie Awards recognize editorial excellence and design accumen in magazine publishing. “This is a huge honor for our editorial team and all of the talented writers and photographers we work with,” says editor-in-chief Charlie Levine. “Seeing our niche fishing magazine beat out some heavy hitters in the sports world feels pretty darn good.”

Two *AJ* contributors also won awards from the Outdoor Writers Association of America. Noah Davis’ “Restoring Balance” in the Winter 2024 issue earned a first place Excellence in Craft award in the Conservation or Nature category for magazine writing. The piece focused on the conservation efforts to save the remaining native Arctic grayling fishery in the lower 48 states.

G.E. MaGrath earned a third-place Excellence in Craft award for “Double Take” in the Summer 2023 issue. Her perception-challenging short story tells a tale of two high school students in pursuit of snook.

“*Anglers Journal* has always published narrative-style stories from a network of gifted writers,” Levine says. “We’re happy to have them in the magazine and happy to see them recognized for their work.”

Huge congrats on *Anglers Journal* winning the Folio: Eddie award. That’s a marlin of a prize. You’ve survived media revolutions, hurricanes, plastics, elections and lord knows what else to produce the finest fishing magazine ever known. Bravo!

Henry Hughes

Contributors

Jason Arnold is an award-winning photographer, author and director based in Florida. He spent many years shooting for the NFL, NBA, NHL, MLB and other sports leagues. While the world of sports photography was action-packed, he never lost his attachment to the sea. He began shooting outdoor photography as a side project, which became his passion. Jason shot the cover photo for this issue.

Third-generation south Miami native **Kevin Dodge** spent 20 years photographing high fashion and other elegant subjects. An avid free diver and lifelong water-sports enthusiast, he turned his lens underwater to capture the beautiful and sometimes dangerous world that belongs to a vast collection of creatures. Kevin took the “Mug Shot” opening-spread photo at the beginning of the issue.

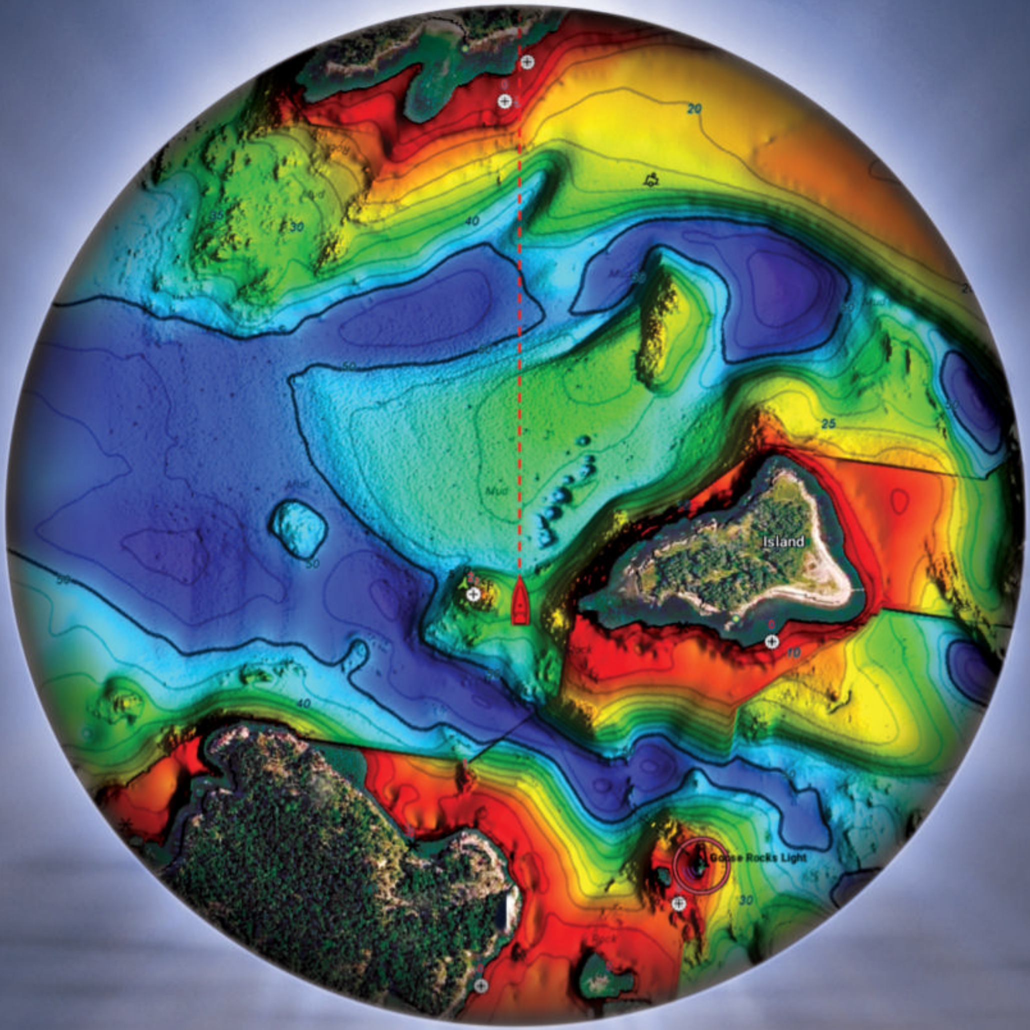
Photography is **Rick Griffiths’** passion — driven by the thrill of capturing new environments, landscapes and other subjects. Turning his passion into his business was a “dream come true.” Based in western Maine, he says fly-fishing was the catalyst for his professional career. His work has been featured in advertisements for such brands as Yeti, Patagonia, Cheeky and Wacaco, as well as Allagash Brewing and Oxbow Brewing. Rick shot the photos for “Fabled Truth.”

Brian Grossenbacher was a fly-fishing guide for 18 years and got into photography by accident when the budget for his second book, *Fly Fishing Montana*, wasn’t sufficient to purchase images. By the time the book was published, he already had a handful of magazine covers and a new passion that became a full-time career Brian shot the photos for “Alaska by Mothership” and wrote the story.

Originally from coastal Connecticut, **David Hebert** found his home in Bozeman, Montana, 30 years ago. He studied graphic design at Montana State University and, after college, expanded into photography. He has spent his career building brands and visual experiences with a diverse eye for detail through his lenses and design work. When his camera is not in-hand, he can be found chasing trout on local rivers. David shot the photos for “Where the Sea Meets the Sky.”

Callan Wink’s stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, *Men’s Journal*, *The Best American Short Stories* and other publications. His first book, *Dog Run Moon*, was published in 2015, followed by *August* in 2020, and his latest work, *Beartooth*, just dropped. A fishing guide in Livingston, Montana, Callan compares the etiquette for guiding on crowded rivers with that of a California surf break in “Locals Only.”

FURUNO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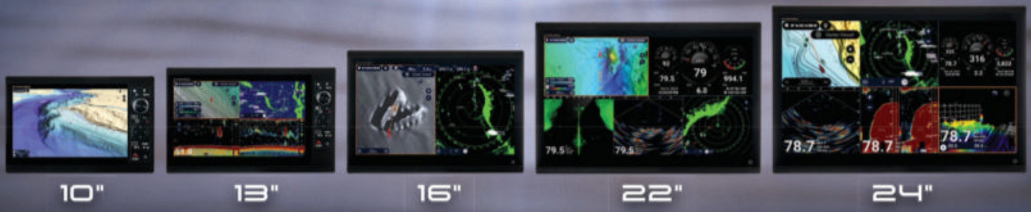
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ANGLERS JOURNAL, Winter 2025, Vol. XII, No. 1, by Active Interest Media, Holdco Inc. The known office of publication is 2143 Grand Ave., Des Moines, IA 50312. Periodicals postage paid at 2143 Grand Ave., Des Moines, IA 50318-9652, and additional mailing offices.
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The Armchair Angler

By Noah Davis

Casting Homeward
By Steve Ramirez
Lyons Press

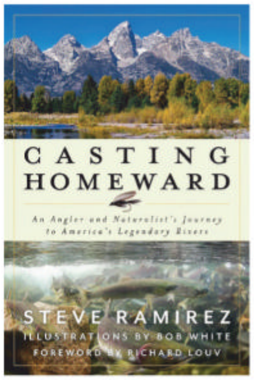
When a friend invites you into their home for a meal or a drink, it's a nice gesture to say that they like you enough to fulfill basic, human needs together. But when a friend invites you fishing, the trust and love that is implied is a privilege that should never be taken for granted.

Steve Ramirez has etched his way into the canon of fly-fishing writing through his *Casting* series, and *Casting Homeward* is the fourth book of the collection. While readers recognize Ramirez's home waters are the creeks of the Texas Hill Country, some might be surprised that the book follows a similar affinity to travel as his *Casting Onward* and *Casting Seaward,* ranging from the Northeast to Alaska to Montana. But Ramirez asserts through his litany of tales that by visiting friends across the country and fishing their home waters, he understands his home better: "Home is a feeling. Home is a connection that comes naturally and cannot be manufactured, but must be accepted."

Salt
By Tom Rosenbauer, Photographs by Andy Anderson
Rizzoli

Crashing surf, leaping tarpon, cheeks tensed in concentration, the expanse only the flats can hold, a wet and chill unique to the weathered rocks of the New England coast, the chain mail scales of a fish's side, the guide's knowing finger, the guide's excited instructions, the line coming tight, the hand on the belly of the fish, the salt that dries on the skin in the sun. Renowned photographer Andy Anderson catches the essence of fishing the coast and flats of the world with gorgeous spreads of landscapes, boats, fish, equipment, guides, weather and the people who live to fish the shallows of our oceans and bays.

Accompanied by Tom Rosenbauer's essays on the themes of wading, flies, guides and fishing buddies, *Salt* is a coffee table book that will help you pass the time after the fall blitzes and before that January trip to the flats.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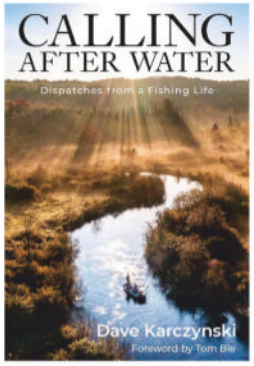
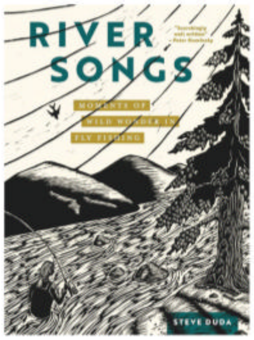
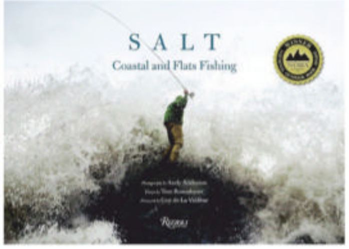
FOREWORD BY RICHARD LOUV







River Songs
By Steve Duda
Mountaineer Press

Like water, Steve Duda's *River Songs* essays carry momentum as they rise and converge. Sentences such as, "It is next to impossible to concentrate on a pod of rampaging coho when a gigantic humpback whale is surfacing one hundred yards from your boat," capture the energy of the world Duda praises. He desires to be submerged in the environs of wild fish and rivers, cold and salt water, carp, salmon, trout and barracuda. It is this world that he remembers hours later on a tailgate with a cigar, a beer and a too-warm sandwich.

The essays, vignette aside and beautiful prints mark this collection that weaves together joy and conservation, community and attention, fishing and simply being. Duda's skill as a storyteller will make readers turn the page, and the wisdom within will keep the book in their truck.

Calling After Water
By Dave Karczynski
Lyons Press

Michigan anglers have a reputation for being maniacal. I don't know if it's the long winters, or the hot dishes, or the sheer amount of water they have available that makes them fish the way they do, but they've earned their standing. Dave Karczynski displays this behavior again and again in *Calling After Water* as he travels the world for Himalayan golden mahseer, native brown trout in the Czech Republic, Caribbean bonefish and the transplanted brook trout of Patagonia.

Yet even after fishing these exotic locales, Karczynski reveals the constant pull of his home waters. The drive to fish them again, yes — the familiarity of knowing a bay or a run or even a whole creek or river — but also, similar to how roots pull a tree to keep it grounded, this tether shows that we are never truly far from the fishing that made us anglers in the first place.

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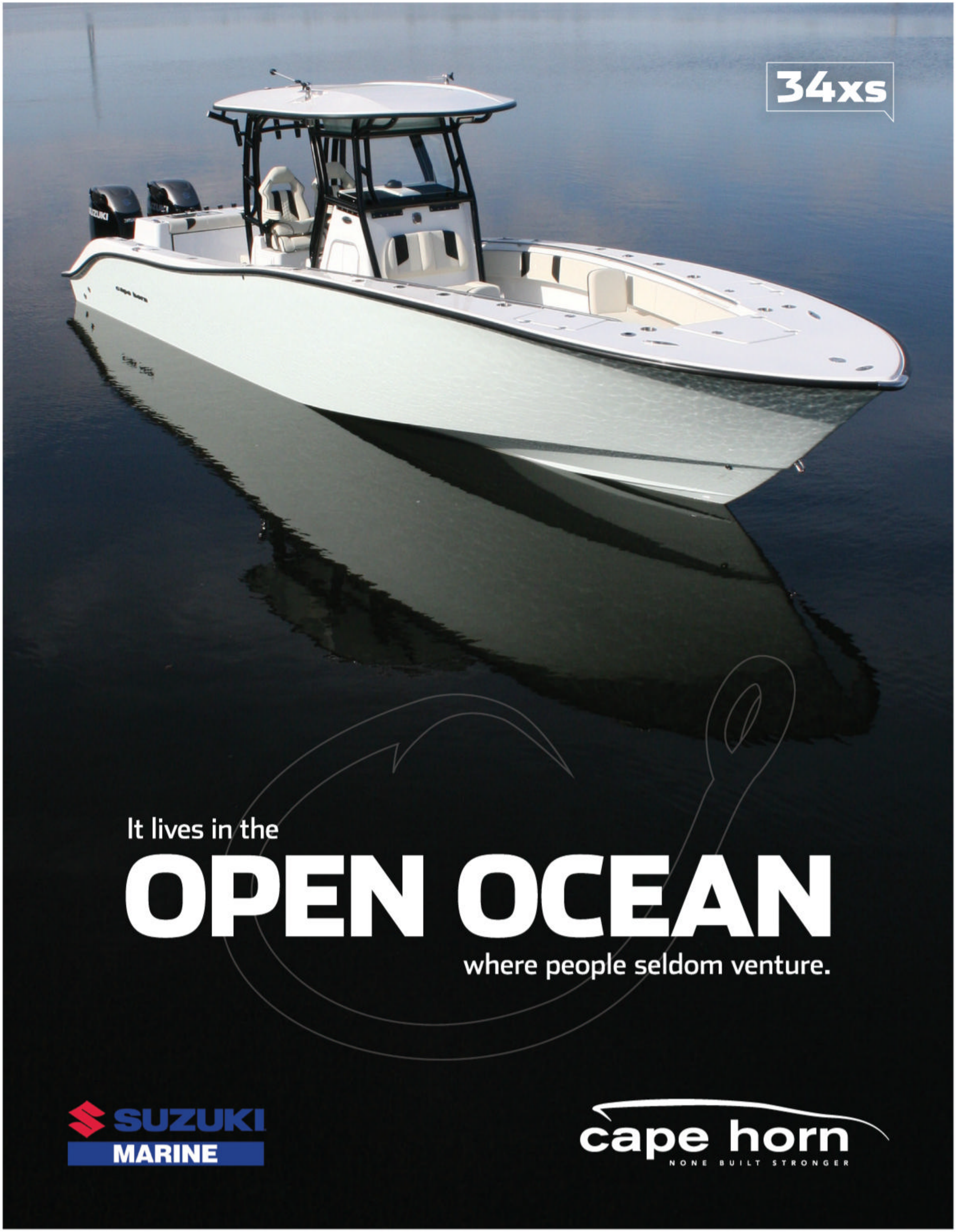
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A Gift of Whitefish

STUMBLING UPON AN INJURED EAGLE IGNITES A SLEW OF QUESTIONS AND THE PARENTAL INSTINCT

By Todd Davis, Photos by Pat Ford

The bald eagle is a formidable angler in its own rite.

THE STREAM FLOWS SOUTH out of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area through western Montana. A marathon of waters running great distances. The waters cling to us long after we've cut off the fly and stepped out of our waders to sit with an exhausted grin. Each day away from this stream, I think of these waters, think on them, playing every whit of their great length.

I like to imagine the journey trout make in the hottest days of summer, from the river in the valley rising into the mountains where waters grow colder, narrowing to their source, which of course is our source, too. The blue clarity they assume is akin to what I think the world's beginning must have been like.

It's along sections of this stream, in places lined with cedar and chokecherry, with oxbows of alder and willow and the ever-present threat of grizzly, that I return each year. Here, sandhill cranes croak as they fly overhead. A beaver's tail slaps at our possible threat. Mule deer crash from the undergrowth as we approach the places where they lay in the midday heat. And as the waters recede with the first hint of summer's drought, we find, in the mud and gravel, mountain lion tracks and bear scat, a wolf's pad following moose hoofprints.

A few hours into the long walk, there's a stretch where a pillar of earth stands in the middle of the watercourse, forming a small hydraulic. For more than a decade, this earthen obelisk has withstood spring floods, marking a place where we've caught sizeable cutthroat and fat brookies, where bull trout in their prodigious sway wait to attack another fish.

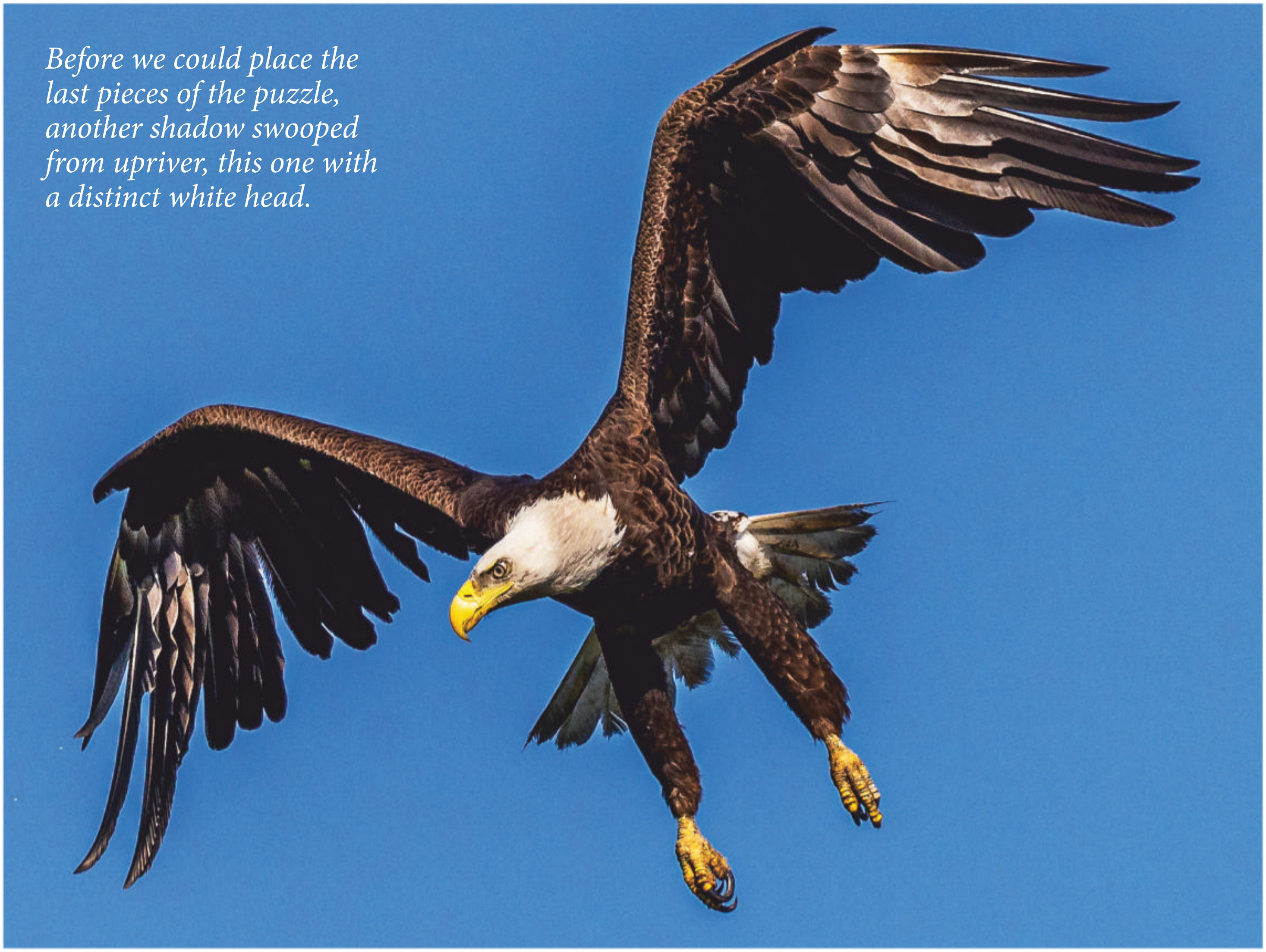
In a memory that feels more dream than real, during the summer before my son Noah married, I walked ahead of him, leaving him to fish a lower bend where a pod of cutthroat was rising. On previous hikes, I'd caught good fish on the far edge of the hydraulic and liked the challenge of mending the line in the fast-moving water, then high-sticking the rest, hoping an aggressive trout might surge from some pocket of stillness on the edge of, or beneath, the swirl.

As I walked by a bank of willows, I noticed an irregular quaking that couldn't be wind. Lurching to a stop, hand on bear spray, I hollered *Hey, bear!* four times. The shaking metamorphosed into a dark arm tangled in the branches.

Foolishly I took a step forward, drawn by a dumbfounded feeling of not knowing and wanting to know. Had my eyes, which had begun to fail in my sixth decade, deceived me? A deer or moose would have burst away from where I stood. A bear, with any luck, would have sulked a bit and trudged in the opposite direction, unless there was a fresh kill to protect.

Specks of blood spattered the gravel in front of a slender game path that allowed entrance into the willow maze, revealing a wound that did exist. The arm shook again and transformed into a wing. An eagle materialized before me, shackled to the earth as if in myth. An immature bird, she awkwardly flexed the injured appendage, frame bobbing and shuddering. I retreated, unsure what my role in all of this should be, only to find Noah walking up, eyes wide in disbelief.

Together we ran through possible scenarios: Had the bird been shot and couldn't fly? Was she tangled in old barbed wire from a time when cattle grazed the meadow? Should we go into the thicket to see if we could free her?



Before we could place the last pieces of the puzzle, another shadow swooped from upriver, this one with a distinct white head.

In our confusion and lack of resolve, a shadow crossed over us, moving quickly, and landed in a snag 20 yards away. A mature golden eagle stared at us with territorial aggression, then aimed its gaze at the injured, immature bald eagle.

Before we could place the last pieces of the puzzle, another shadow swooped from upriver, this one with a distinct white head, slamming her body into the golden eagle and displacing him from the snag. Their screams overcame the noise of the waters. The bald eagle chased the golden eagle the length of the meadow until the golden eagle disappeared and the bald eagle circled back to perch in an aspen tree.

We retreated downstream. No reason to be bystanders in a battle we had no stake in. But the next day — because the fishing had been so good and because the parent in me slept with restless concern — we hiked back to the obelisk at the stream's bend to check on the immature bald eagle. She stood on the sandy spit, no longer taking cover in the willow thicket, her parent nowhere in sight. Upon seeing us, she flew gingerly — as if walking on air with a limp — and landed in the snag where yesterday her tormenter sat.

We weren't going to get close enough to examine her, but I wanted to make sure she had what she needed to heal. Maybe a meal. Raptors burn calories at an alarming rate. Even if her parent brought fish or rodents or birds, hunting for two is never easy.

Noah tied on a dropper and floated a run downstream where we'd seen whitefish feeding, scales glittering golden along the stream bottom. Whitefish are good eating, and soon Noah had a fat 15-incher on the bank, where he quickly broke its spine.

We walked the fish to where the obelisk centered the stream. Noah, all 6 feet, 5 inches of him, arched his back, launching the dead whitefish into the air. It twirled and hung for a moment, pearly and glistening, then fell with a thud at the base of the snag. The eagle looked at us, looked down at the fish, and waited for us to leave.

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John Gierach

Bob Popovics

A Tribute to John Gierach and Bob Popovics

THE FLY-FISHING WORLD LOST TWO PILLARS IN 2024 WHO WILL BE SORELY MISSED

ANGLERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO FLY-FISH, hold common bonds that tie them together like a blood knot: a love of the outdoors, a passion for the pursuit and pull of a fish, the desire to share stories. These bonds bring us together, whether it's through the pages of a book, or sitting around a table tying flies. The fishing world last fall lost two men who embodied this spirit, author John Gierach and fly-tyer Bob Popovics.

Gierach, who penned more than 20 books and thousands of essays and articles, passed away Oct. 3 from cardiac arrest. He was 77. The renowned fly fisherman could capture the spirit of a trout stream with insightful introspection and a knack for moving past the frustrations or snobbishness often linked to fly-fishing.

Gierach moved from the Midwest to Colorado in the late 1960s, where he hatched his writing career. Known for his sharp wit and deep reverence for nature, Gierach became a beloved figure in fly-fishing circles through his words. His work was marked by a mix of humor, philosophy and practical fishing advice, blending technical knowledge with a profound sense of wonder for all species of trout and the rivers in which they live.

His books *Trout Bum* (1986), *Sex, Death and Fly-Fishing* (1990) and other works inspired thousands of anglers to take to the water, enjoy the journey and drink strong coffee, because life is too short to not go fishing. "There are people in my life who sometimes worry about me when I go off into the fields and streams, not realizing that the country is a calm, gracious, forgiving place and that the real dangers are found in the civilization you have to pass through to get there," Gierach wrote in *Trout Bum*.

On Nov. 1, the fishing community mourned the passing of fly-tyer Bob Popovics, who succumbed to injuries sustained from a hit-and-run automobile accident in late September. He was 75. Popovics treated everyone with a kindness and eagerness to help that seems to be vanishing from fishing. Whether hosting a seminar or bumping into a fan on his New Jersey home waters, Popovics answered every question patiently, enthusiastically and with a smile.

"Bob [was] the single kindest, most approachable and most encouraging celebrity in any field I've ever met," says fly-fishing writer and longtime friend Jonny King in a Popovics profile published in the Spring 2019 issue of *Anglers Journal*. "Bob has often told me that the key to demonstrating anything about tying or fishing publicly is not to show what *you* can do, but to make sure others realize *they* can do it, too."

Known for his innovative flies, including the Beast, Surf Candy and many more, Popovics often welcomed fellow fly anglers into his tying lair in the attic of his home in Seaside Park, New Jersey. He and his wife, Alexis, moved into the house in 1984, and for many years Popovics hosted Tuesday evening get-togethers that drew tyers from hundreds of miles away. "The idea was to share knowledge and have a good time," he says in the profile. "The internet didn't exist back then, so guys didn't have any other way of finding out about new fly patterns or techniques. Guys getting into saltwater fly-fishing were having a hard time because the information just wasn't out there."

Popovics took to fly-fishing after returning home from Vietnam, where he served as a Marine. "I wanted to do something about the fly patterns available to saltwater fly anglers, so I started experimenting with tying a big bunker fly for catching big striped bass," he told *Anglers Journal*.

Popovics authored two books, *Pop Fleyes* and *Fleye Design*. He was often found at the Shady Rest restaurant in Bayville, New Jersey, which his family owned for several decades. Popovics was universally admired by famous fly-fishermen and the average Joe who bumped into him while casting for stripers in the surf. "There was no cooler cat on the beach," says his longtime friend, photographer Tom Lynch.

STEPHEN COLLECTOR (LEFT); TOM LYNCH

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Late-Season Blitz

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF A DAY SPENT MEANDERING ALONG THE JERSEY SHORE IN HOPES OF A BASS BITE

By Stephen Sautner, Photos by Tom Lynch

There's nothing quite like striped bass breaking up a bunker party.

I STEP OUT OF MY CAR on a dead-end road lined with garish Jersey Shore mansions just after sunrise and take a quick look at the surf. There's a decent swell and some nice whitewater, but no one is fishing. A few trucks idle in the lot with the heat on, rods clamped to roof racks. I chat with one guy, sipping coffee with his window down, who says he's been here awhile. "Nothing happening. Just those whales," he says, pointing. Sure enough, two humpbacks spout about a half-mile off the beach. We watch them slowly steam south.

I decide to follow them, so I drive to a nearby beach club. It's closed for the season, but the parking lot overlooks the ocean. The humpbacks are closer now, and I watch them through binoculars from a seawall. Then I see bunker splashing, bass busting on them. The school moves in front of a jetty and within casting range. Gulls whirl. *Here we go.* In a flurry, I suit up and hurry toward the surf. The bass briefly erupt again, this time 100 yards down the beach. Then they're gone.

Another surfcaster shows up, and we fish side-by-side in the pocket next to the jetty. He misses a blowup on a popper, and I miss a thump on a bucktail, but that's all. I leave, driving south through Asbury Park. I stop at the next town, Ocean Grove. I walk to the beach with my binoculars and see birds a half-mile south in Bradley Beach, so I move again.

In Bradley, a few guys are casting, and gulls circle. I grab the surf rod and plug bag. Birds swing in close to a jetty, and I see bass busting. I pass a guy landing a schoolie on a swim shad in the pocket on the north side. Not wanting to crowd him, I set up on the south side and immediately get a swing-and-miss on a spook, then nothing. The birds are a long cast away. I put on a tin and boom it out. I miss a strike,

then go fishless on my next half-dozen casts. I switch to a big bucktail and red trailer and finally land a small fish — maybe 4 pounds.

Meanwhile, Swim Shad Guy is putting on a clinic, landing schoolie after schoolie, and two guys that set up next to him are hooking up on pencils. Swim Shad Guy lands a 34-incher — which he announces to the world. A fly fisherman joins the party, clambering onto the jetty, and lands two schoolies, one after the other, while I cycle through my entire surf bag without a touch. Clearly, I'm in the wrong spot despite a pod of about 50 adult bunker swimming figure-eights around my feet.

A striper on the prowl, ready to ambush.

I make the walk of shame and join the lineup. A fish swirls in the whitewater in tight, so on a hunch, I switch to a ¾-ounce, lime-green bucktail, and it works. I quickly land four schoolies while the other guys go cold. Then the bite dies, and we all start wandering off the beach.

I drive back north and end up at the same parking lot with the ocean view, where I was this morning. Nothing happening. I eat a quick lunch and brew a pot of coffee on my camp stove. A guy pulls up in a pickup with rod racks, and we begin chatting. I've come to learn that anglers looking for blitzes are far more talkative. There's an exchange of information: where you just came from, what you saw and who caught what yesterday. Then he gets a call from a buddy who says there's bass at a beach 20 miles south, and he leaves. It's too far for me, so I stay and finish my coffee.

Birds begin circling a quarter-mile down the beach, so I get in my car and drive a few blocks. There's an older guy with binoculars at the end of the street. He's watching three anglers cast next to a jetty. He tells me they're picking away at schoolies. I think about joining, but then they start running south. I look beyond the squadron of surfcasters and see birds working tight. I hop in the car and drive two blocks to intercept them.

When I get to the beach, 20 guys are lined up with bent rods, birds and bass blitzing in front of them. I'm about to make my first cast when the birds suddenly head north and begin diving along a jetty 100 yards away. Anglers run past me to climb onto the rocks. I hurry past the scrum on the rocks, thinking the fish will move my way and I'll have them to myself — at least for a little while.

Bass blow up a massive school of adult bunker right in front of me. I send a 6-inch Spook seaward. It lands in the melee, but there's so much bait I wind up snagging a bunker. The next cast touches down on the edge of the school and is walloped. I set the hook, and I'm on. A few minutes later, I slide a bulked-out, 20-pound striper onto the beach for a quick release. The main bunker school pushes past, but bass remain to pick off stragglers. They slash and boil everywhere in the whitewater, the breakers. I watch an individual bunker get inhaled in a giant slurp. A green wave curls, and I can clearly see a half-dozen, 15-pound stripers in tight formation behind hundreds of fleeing bunker.

A big bass slams my lure at the lip of a wave, thrashing wildly and throwing water. It grinds out a long run, and I lean back, clutching the rod with both hands. Eventually I beach a 30-pounder that looks like it's been wolfing down steroids.

I'm not sure how long the action lasts, 45 minutes, maybe an hour. What I do know is that the big Spook and I apparently can do no wrong. I land 15 "overs" in nearly as many casts. The blitz dissipates, and I'm almost glad, as it was teetering on the precipice of gluttony. I reel in my plug and walk up to the joyful angler fishing next to me. He greets me with an enthusiastic *Dude!* and a fist bump. We laugh and swap tales. I wander back to my car in a daze — covered in sweat, salt and sand, happy to be alive.

The blitzes end and give way to winter, leaving surfcasters with a long break before the next season.

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Out of the Dust

REDISCOVERING A LOST ERA OF FLATS FISHING AND CREATIVITY IN THE FLORIDA KEYS THROUGH THE 1973 FILM *TARPON*

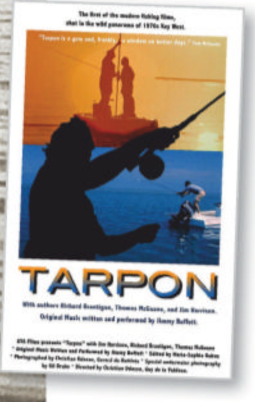
By Owen James Burke

The film crew used platforms on the Key West flats to capture fishing footage.

CHRISTIAN ODASSO; COURTESY DIANA ODASSO

KEY WEST HAS A LONG HISTORY of drawing fishing luminaries. Novelist (and dentist) Zane Grey was among the first. Then, of course, came Ernest Hemingway and his band of miscreants, beggars and hangers on. Hot on Hemingway's heels in the throes of a fly-fishing high when the sport was taking to the brine, the late-1960s guard was, from an angling perspective, the most prolific of them all.

The impetus varied from one person (and moment) to the next, but the assemblage of Thomas McGuane, Jim Harrison, Guy de la Valdène, Jimmy Buffett and a bohemian retinue of writers, musicians and artists capitalizing on a *laissez-faire* city by the sea was largely due to an untapped tarpon fishery.


The first of the modern fishing films, shot in the wild panorama of 1970s Key West.
TARPON
With authors Richard Brautigan, Thomas McGuane, and Jim Harrison.
Original Music written and performed by Jimmy Buffett.

"As soon as I had some writing money, I went down there. It was 1969," McGuane says of Key West in an interview for the retrospective, somewhat-behind-the-scenes Yeti documentary *All That Is Sacred,* about the soon-to-be-released 1973 film *Tarpon.* "The prime time, really, was when it was just Guy and I down there. And we were just there as serious fishermen."

Shot in 16-millimeter film, *Tarpon* is a profile of a Shangri-La in a bygone, gilded era of fly-fishing. On the periphery was an array of predominantly non-angling literati and socialites, holdovers and peripatetics/flaneurs alike. Richard Brautigan, whose 1967 novella *Trout Fishing in America* had just landed him in the limelight of both the

For a brief period in time, Thomas McGuane had the only flats skiff in Key West. (Below) Author Richard Brautigan holds court.

literary and fishing worlds, arrived on the scene shortly after Valdène, Harrison and McGuane.

Eventually, this motley congregation caught the attention of Valdène's brother-in-law, French cinematographer Christian Odasso. Odasso took interest in the enclave and the writers who'd decided to hold court in Key West; the fishing to him was secondary to the narrative. He wanted to see — and film — Brautigan candidly. While McGuane and Harrison were already notable, Brautigan was, at that point, one of the most famous literary figures of the counterculture. None of the film's subjects-to-be made themselves terribly available during filming.

"We weren't interested in making a movie at the time," McGuane confesses in *All That Is Sacred.* As for what the film ultimately became? The title, *Tarpon,* says it all.

CHRISTIAN ODASSO (2)

It may not have been what Odasso, who died in 2011, had hoped to shoot, but it took on a life of its own, and despite as of yet having no major, official release, it carries a cultural caché to the tune of Bob Dylan and The Band's *Basement Tapes,* which sustained nearly a decade of hushed, under-the-table circulation before Columbia officially released it. Diana Odasso, Odasso's daughter and a writer and filmmaker of her own accord, helped produce a DVD of *Tarpon* in 2008.

The DVD sold well during its limited run, broadening and solidifying its status as a (fishing) cult classic. Director Scott Ballew got the idea to shoot a documentary about the making of *Tarpon* and approached Odasso for help bringing up the quality of the original film. Now the 1973 movie is due to hit streaming platforms in March 2025.

"We wanted to keep the documentary sort of exactly as it was," Odasso told me from her Lake Worth, Florida, home. Recovering and digitizing those old reels — many of which were covered in rust — was a herculean chore. "I had huge crates being shipped from a barn in France. It's been an interesting education in restoring old film," she says. "We were not able to find better sound, so the sound is probably the least-restored of the things." The audio track includes the original score for the film by an unpaid, largely yet-unknown singer-songwriter named Jimmy Buffett.

After filming in the Keys, Valdène invited Buffett, along with Harrison, to France for post-production scoring and narration. The weeks-long process was such a slog that Buffett recalled killing time by procuring a large bag of pot and a key to the wine cellar at the Valdène family castle outside of Paris. Three weeks into their sojourn, the time came for Buffett to work out the score, which, in his telling, was handled in a day.

"There's always been a weird population of fishermen that have known

The tarpon fishing and Key West were still wild, but a wave of tourism was beginning to crash the scene.

about this film, that have watched crappy, grainy, bootleg copies forever," Odasso says. "And I hear from these people literally every day; we get emails. They want the poster. They want T-shirts. Now, for fishermen, it's sort of a lost period. It's this high point in flats and tarpon fishing, and fly-fishing that doesn't exist anymore, especially not in Key West."

That's not to say you can't go to the Keys in the spring and find tarpon. They're there, but there's so much fishing pressure that the fish are as skittish as ever — save for those lackadaisically snatching food scraps around marina docks.

"Tell me about the fish," someone demands of a resplendent, hammock-lounging Brautigan during a segment in the original film. He cuts right in: "Massively lyrical. A very powerful, lyrical thing. Extraordinary. So extraordinary as to create immediate unreality upon contact with the fish.

"I don't see how you could design anything or wish for anything more than a tarpon. … Shallow water, deep water, light tackle, heavy tackle — I mean, they do everything. I'm not a good authority 'cause I haven't fished that many places, but I think a tarpon is just the best."

Despite excesses of seemingly mythical proportions — and the collateral damage along the way — this close-knit cadre of gentlemen never lost sight of what they had in front of them, and judging by certain dialogues in the film, they didn't allow themselves to become jaded, either. There's a prescient discussion that takes place during what looks like an after-hours captain's meeting of sorts, exchanging sobering realizations and predictions about the way things were going in the Keys. "Even back then, people could see the shift happening in South Florida," Odasso says.

Valdène puts forth: "What happens, for example, if in six or seven years from now, you or I or Page or anybody here has to work, say, for three or four days before they can get their customers to jump two or three fish? In other words, is there anything physical that's scaring the fish off the flats?"

"I think it's just motorboat pressure," Woody Sexton, a senior tarpon guide answers curtly.

"There is no question that the traffic is going to have some great impact on these fish," Ray Donnersberger, another guide, chimes in.

"I think we're seeing the end of it," blurts a weathered, discontented voice. The camera cuts to a series of tourism vignettes: cruise ships unloading pasty passengers in droves, a party boat full of ambitious anglers with mates gleefully bludgeoning everything from permit to sharks. This was not the culture of Valdène and McGuane, to be sure.

"There are probably 60 or 70 bonefish skiffs in Key West right now, guide skiffs," McGuane says in an interview from his Montana home. "I had the only one. I had the only skiff in the whole place."

There's a scene in *Tarpon,* set on the flats, in which Valdène is poling backward from the bow of McGuane's skiff while McGuane stands on the side-console dash, fly rod in hand, line coiled on the deck, ready to fire. These guys were doing this stuff before the boats were even outfitted for it. They were also practicing catch-and-release, a novel concept at the time.

Fishing aside, *Tarpon* is a feat in filmmaking. "You're dealing with 16-millimeter film, doing slow-motion focus pulls on fish jumping, which is technically, as a filmmaker, very hard, and you cannot be on a moving boat," Odasso says. "They had to create a sort of stable location."

Coming from outside of the fishing world, it's something of a small miracle that Christian Odasso captured what a good many notables, including novelist Carl Hiaasen, distinguish as "some of the greatest tarpon footage that's ever been shot."

"It was in Guy's basement for a quarter of a century or something before it got fished back out again," McGuane recalls.

"I can't remember. I know that we tried very hard to sell it," Valdène says.

"My uncle wasn't the best businessman," Odasso answers, in tune with, though a little more gracious than, how Buffett recalls his late friend: "I don't think it ever got shown. Guy was kind of a … his sense of business was nil."

The same old story of fishermen and artists alike.

CHRISTIAN ODASSO

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My Boat, My Life

By Jon Davis

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I GREW UP BOATING AND FISHING IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA, and the classic, flatback center consoles I'd see always spoke to me. They have a unique, almost workboat look, and because it's basically a flat-bottom hull, you can run them in very skinny water. They're beamy, stable and economical.

Atlas Boatworks was a small builder in Cape Coral on the west coast of Florida that had a 23-foot center console with the flatback look and ride I like. I spoke to the builder, who was getting older and wanted to sell the company and retire, but he was primarily focused on a 25-foot, lobster-style pocket cruiser that I had no interest in. At the time, I was in e-commerce and distribution for a footwear retailer, but the company made some changes, and I got laid off. It gave me a chance to reassess what I really wanted to do, and I knew I wanted to work in fishing or boating.

I circled back with the Atlas Boatworks owner a couple of months later, and he said he had divided up the company and sold everything except for the 23, the model I was interested in. I bought the mold in February 2024, and we had our first hull ready to run in late July.

The original builder had launched eight of these boats over the last few years. I tracked down those eight owners and asked them what they liked about the Atlas 23 and what they disliked. They all said there were two things they'd change: the transom and the scuppers. The original design allowed water to flow back into the stern, so we reengineered the transom and raised the deck and scuppers a bit. We also went with a lighter engine. We completely updated the manufacturing process. There is no wood in the boat; it's 100 percent composite. By making these changes we took nearly 200 pounds out of the boat. The 23-foot hull now weighs 1,800 pounds.

The boat has an 8-foot, 2-inch beam and true gunwales that you can walk on — guides like it for that reason. You can put four people in the boat, and they can all stand on one side without an issue.

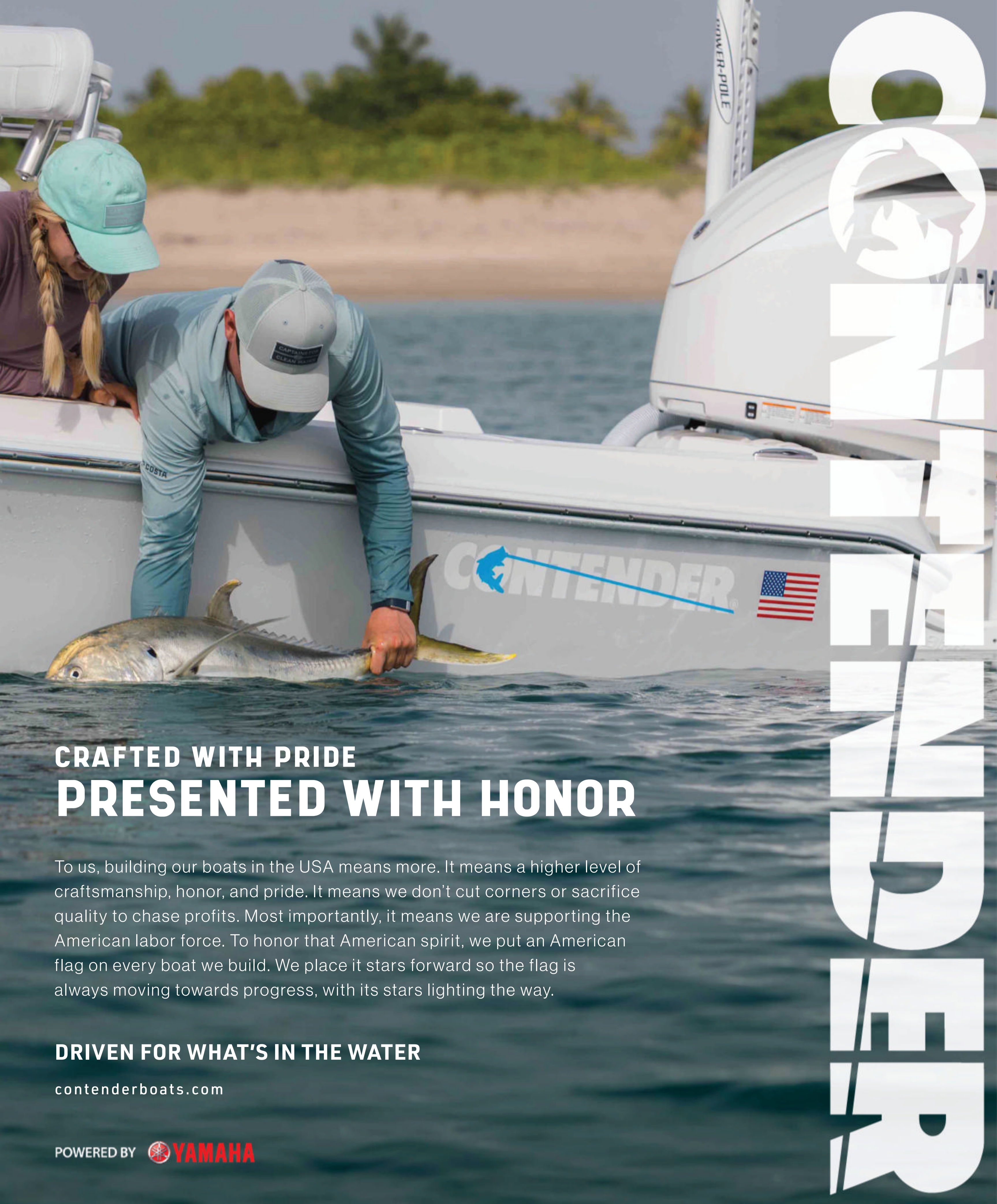
The deep-vee bow cuts through the chop, and the reverse chine gives the boat a nice, dry ride. The sweet spot for the cruise speed is between 25 and 30 mph, with a 58-gallon tank. The Porta Bracket hydraulic jackplate gives the outboard 12 inches of vertical lift and 15 inches of setback. You don't trim the engine like you would traditionally with tilt and trim; you're basically raising it vertically. We can get on plane in a foot and a half of water by pulling the engine up, but you still have the same thrust and running angle. The hull draws just 10 inches.

My goal is to work directly with customers to option the boat exactly how they want it. We're not looking to be a production builder. By going direct-to-consumer we establish a relationship with the customer as we walk them through the build process and determine what features work for them.

The 38-gallon live well comes standard, but we can customize it to include cushions, a backrest or additional rod holders. We can do a windshield, tower or T-top. We also offer a casting deck option up front. It's totally up to the owner what they want to do.

We're big on access to systems. We have a big hatch for fuel tank access. It's also really easy to access all of the pumps and the fuel separator at the transom. The console is sizable, so you can install analog gauges or keep it clean with just MFDs. We can fit two 12-inch screens on the dash. And everything is labeled and meticulously wired — I should know, I did it myself.

The Atlas Boatworks 23F has classic lines that anyone who has been around boats for a while will appreciate. I think of it as a workboat meets an inshore fishing boat. After fishing, you just spray it down and go home.



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WHERE THE SEA MEETS THE SKY

GRAND SLAM LODGE ON MEXICO’S ASCENSION BAY IS AN IDEAL BASE CAMP FOR CHASING PERMIT, TARPON AND BONEFISH

BY CHARLIE LEVINE, PHOTOS BY DAVID HEBERT

BLUEFIN USA
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There is no better way to wash off the annoyances of airline travel than to step aboard a boat. The long wait outside the Cancún airport and the bumpy stretch of road through the tourism zone in Tulum sailed off in the rearview mirror as we loaded our gear onto the Grand Slam Lodge panga and set off for open waters. A light drizzle fell as the guide, Gaspi, opened up the throttle on the Honda outboard and headed toward a small cut in the mangroves.

I glanced over at Corbin Blackford, whom I'd just met for the first time, and he was wearing a wide smile. Blackford, a 41-year-old fly fisherman from Houston, was the lucky winner of this trip to Grand Slam Lodge as part of a special promotion to celebrate *Anglers Journal*'s 10-year anniversary. "I've never even won a game of bingo," Blackford said when we shook hands in Cancún. "But I'd happily trade all the bingo games in the world to win this trip."

You never know whom you're going to end up with when you run a sweepstakes, and Blackford proved to be an ideal fishing buddy. He is funny, affable and easygoing, and he showed up well-stocked. His fly cases were packed with every pattern the lodge recommended. He even made a pit stop at the airport's duty-free shop and picked up rum, tequila and cigars. We were off to a solid start.

The panga ride from Tulum to the lodge in Punta Allen provided but a glimpse of the diversity in Ascension Bay. This shallow-water paradise stretches 37 miles long and 14 miles wide. It resides within Sian Ka'an, a massive biosphere reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site. The name comes from a Mayan term that loosely translates

GRAND SLAM
a Deluxe fly fishing lodge

to "a place where heaven begins." And when you look out on the expansive flats that melt away into the horizon, you can understand why the Mayans held these waters in such high regard. In many ways, the area reminds me of the Everglades, but the waters are more vast, with less vegetation and way fewer people. The protected waters remain mostly untouched. "You see the sheer diversity of the flats we have," says Vittorio Kier, the lodge's director of operations and fishing. "There's turtle grass, sand, mud, mangrove shorelines, and islands and sandbars."

The Mayans treated this land as sacred, and when conditions provide a glass-calm day with bluebird skies, the water and sky seem to meld, masking the horizon — a landscape awash in a beautiful blue. I can see why they thought of it as heaven's gate.

The captain relied on his decades of experience, not GPS, as we weaved through unmarked channels and mangrove creeks. After an hour or so, he slowed the motor and said, "we're here." We idled up to a small dock and wedged our way among the lodge's other 23-foot pangas rigged for fly-fishing. The crew said they'd gather our bags, and we hightailed it to a waiting Jeep to run us the short distance up a dirt road to the lodge. The mosquitos were about as eager to see us as we were to be there.

Punta Allen is situated at the southern end of a skinny peninsula that acts as a barrier between Ascension Bay and the Caribbean. This small town is ensconced in flats-fishing history. The waters teem with opportunities to catch bonefish, tarpon, snook and, perhaps the most notable foe, the elusive permit. Catch three or more of these species in a day, and you've landed a grand slam, one of the most coveted goals in fishing, hence the name of the lodge.

Grand Slam Lodge sits on a sugar-sand beach looking east over the Caribbean. Anglers stay in well-appointed rooms, all of which have views of the lapping waves. There's an excellent chef on staff who serves up Mexican-inspired meals, as well as dishes with an Italian or Japanese flair. It's a far cry from the Spartan eco-lodge that existed on this property when Carlos Kier, a hotel developer, acquired it in 1999. At the time, there were only a few huts with mosquito nets on the beach. A boa constrictor actually fell on Kier while he slept in a hut when he first came to see the property, but after spending a few days exploring by boat, he was sold.

The Kier family opened the lodge in 2009. "Since day one, Grand Slam has been my mom Alice's project," Vittorio says. "She's been the boss ever since. I manage the fishing and marketing."

The veteran guides know every inch of Ascension Bay.

Corbin Blackford, a 41-year-old fly fisherman from Houston, won a trip to Grand Slam Lodge and made good use of his time there.

While permit are the most-coveted gamefish in Ascension Bay, no one complains about chasing schools of bonefish.

ARIAN STEVENS (TOP LEFT)

Vittorio, or Vito as most call him, at 24 is one of the fishiest guys I've met. Inshore or offshore, conventional or fly, this man can do it all. He often guides repeat clients and has a knack for finding giant snook. "I caught my first fish when I was not even a year old with my dad," he says. "Fishing has always been my number-one passion, along with anything nature-related. I've always liked animals, especially reptiles and fish and birds, very exotic animals. I was the kid who picked up snakes and all those critters. And I always walk around barefoot."

Growing up in Puerto Morelos, a small fishing village between Cancún and Playa del Carmen, Vito had plenty of access to the water. It was the perfect environment for the young angler. "I'd come back home from school and pick up a fishing rod and go fishing in the evening for snook and tarpon on the beach," he says. He loved to catch tarpon and jacks. When the family decided to build Grand Slam, the youngster was in a perfect spot to expand on his fishing prowess.

Miles of Possibilities

You don't realize how massive Ascension Bay is until you're barreling across it in a panga. The flats seem to run on forever. With Gaspi at the helm on our first day of fishing, we headed south for what felt like an hour, though the morning ride always seems longer than the afternoon trip home as anticipation mounts. After meandering through the maze of islands and fishy-looking points, Gaspi slowed the motor and cut the engine as we approached a mangrove shoreline and saw tarpon rolling along the edge of vegetation. The 63-year-old guide climbed to the poling platform and began to push the big panga perpendicular to the mangroves. The 10- to 15-knot winds didn't seem to phase him.

Blackford grabbed a 12-weight rod and a black-and-purple fly. He stepped up to the casting platform as Gaspi pointed and said, "10 o'clock, 40 feet." With one false cast, Blackford uncurled a tight loop that unfolded right on the edge of the mangrove. We stared at the fly until our gaze was broken by a massive blow up off the stern. Another pod of tarpon was busting bait, sending showers of silver cascading like ripples in a pond. Gaspi followed a pair of tarpon, and Blackford made a money shot, resulting in a bite.

"Set the hook!" Gaspi hollered from his perch, but Blackford already was on. We'd been fishing all of 15 minutes. The juvenile tarpon wasn't the largest fish in the pod, but it was a nice icebreaker. Blackford's trip to Grand Slam was already paying dividends.

"We get a migration of big tarpon from late May to early August," Vito says. "They're coming from the south, from Nicaragua and Costa Rica. They come up to Ascension Bay where they rest and come into the shallow water. It's such a big ecosystem, and they've known it for years."

After releasing the first tarpon of the day, we continued to work along the mangroves, finding acres of bait and shots at more tarpon. Taking my turn on the bow, I blind cast till my forearms burn, but it gives me time to dial in my cast. Gaspi spies more tarpon and sneaks up to them. At about 45 feet, I make my cast, and the smaller of the fish turns on the fly. "Strip! Strip! Strip!" the guide hollers. I speed up the presentation, and the fish hits the throttle to overtake the fly and launches into the air. I strip-set as hard as I can, but there's slack in the line. After a couple of jumps, the fish is gone. Setting the hook on a tarpon is like setting the hook into bone. It doesn't always grab hold. I am satisfied with my effort but bummed the fish shook free.

Fishing scenes ranged from mangrove shorelines to open-water flats.

18+

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Grand Slam Lodge, in Punta Allen, Mexico, offers easy access to Ascension Bay, a protected body of water that spans roughly 200,000 acres.

I swap places with Blackford, and the conversation flows easily. We have similar tastes in music and plenty of fishing stories. He takes an annual fishing trip with his father to visit a new fishery. They had been in the Bahamas earlier in the year chasing bonefish. When I called to give him the news about winning the trip to Grand Slam, he asked if he could have 24 hours to speak to his wife, Kristin. Not two hours later, he booked a flight.

When fishing the mangroves slows, we pick up and move to a beach where tarpon cruise a trough just off the sand. The beauty of the uninhabited beach is slighted by the trash that washes up from places unknown to the east. The tarpon, however, don't seem to mind. Blackford makes a cast to a waiting school and hooks a bigger fish on the 12-weight. When we see the size of the fish, we decide to keep it in the water. I ask Blackford if he wants a photo of himself holding the fish in the water and releasing it, and he jumps right in. We spend a few minutes getting the light right and firing off photos. Blackford is in fishing heaven. "I always wanted to get a photo like that," he says.

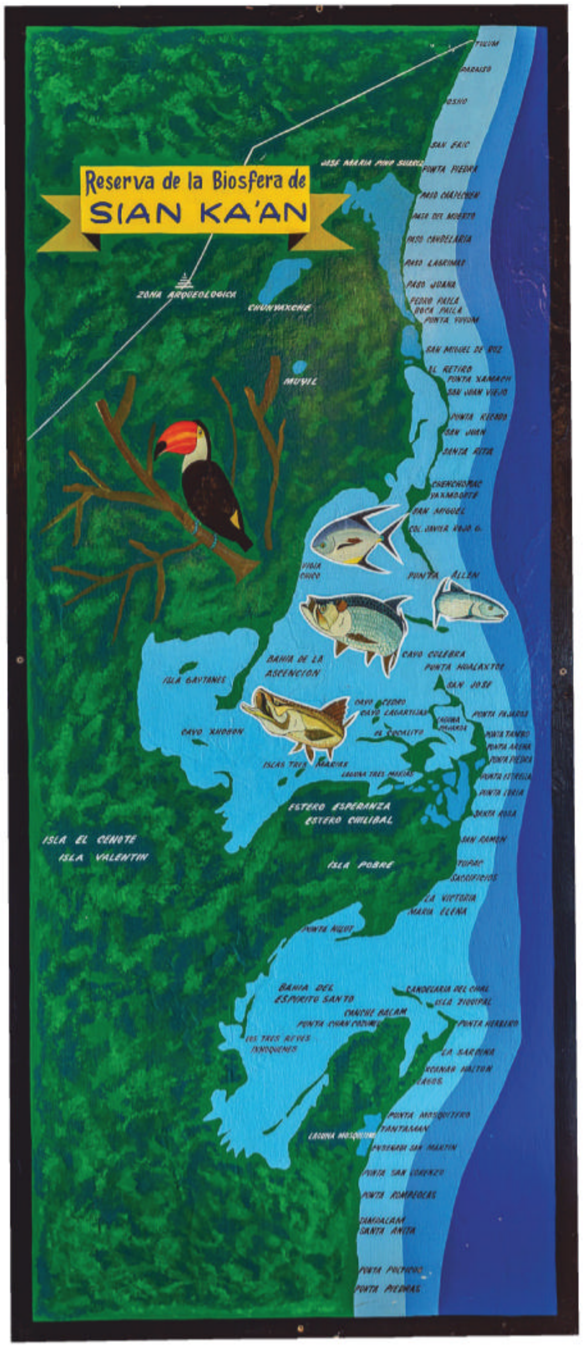
He cut off the fly and put it somewhere safe in his bag, planning to frame the photo and fly together when he gets home. We end the day chasing bonefish schools. We also had a few shots at permit, but they were moving quickly and didn't want to play nice.

A Steady Supply of Fish

Most of Grand Slam's bookings occur between January and May. The lodge can accommodate 24 anglers or 12 boats, and often hosts large groups. While they do catch permit every month, Vito favors the less-busy summer period. Our trip was originally planned for early July but was rescheduled to mid-September because of Hurricane Beryl.

"June does get busy, but the weather is good, and there's a lot of fish in the bay," Vito says. "From June to September, that's my favorite time. It's hot, but the weather is usually very nice. Not much wind and a lot of fish moving in and out of the bay, especially when it comes to permit and tarpon — we have a big influx of them."

While we were fishing the tail end of the season, there were still plenty of fish around. After stalking the flats all day, we met a group of three friends who come together for a fishing trip each year. They flew in from San Francisco, Chicago and New York, and had already caught more than 40 bonefish between them. They also had shots at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LAGUNA MOSQUITERO
ENSENADA SAN MARTIN
PUNTA SAN LORENZO
PUNTA ROMPEOLAS
TAMBALCAM
SANTA ANITA
PUNTA POLTRERO
PUNTA PIEDRAS

permit, their main target. "I had a perfect cast at a permit. I was casting right in front of him, but he wouldn't eat," the New Yorker said. "It was super frustrating — I can't wait to do it again!"

False Casts Full of Hope

Our second day of fishing started slow. We motored to a different spot and worked a new stretch of beach for tarpon. We didn't see any fish or get any bites. We picked away at a few small bonefish before having lunch in the mangroves, where we befriended a giant iguana and fed it crust from our sandwiches. In the afternoon, the bonefish bite picked up, and Blackford and I both caught several fish.

Anytime I started to feel frustrated by my casting or the unwilling gamefish, I slowed down and soaked in the setting. The long, clear flats. The azure waters. The sound of windswept waves and birdsong. This fishery is an oasis of quiet that doesn't exist in many places.

When we got back to the lodge, we shared a drink with Thomas Connolly, a 30-something real estate developer on a solo trip from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Connolly had never caught a tarpon or a permit. He brought a single 10-weight rod and ended up renting an 8-weight from the lodge. He's a trout fisherman, and a lucky one at that. The next day he caught six permit, 12 bonefish and a tarpon. A grand slam on his first day, a feat he repeated on his next fishing day. The lodge manager ended up putting Connolly's photo on the wall of the restaurant. We all watched jealously.

Our final fishing days weren't quite as good as Connolly's action, but they were magical nonetheless. We explored new waters, and stalked tarpon, bonefish and permit. The vistas stretch for miles, like fishing in a Winslow Homer painting.

My favorite moment came on our final day of fishing. We headed toward a flat by the mouth of Ascension Bay. A thunderstorm was building in the distance, painting the sky with a thick swath of charcoal running vertically down the center. The guide spotted a large permit and staked out the boat. We jumped out of the panga with the mate, whose vision was nearly as good as an osprey's. He walked slowly with us as the permit moved about the turtle grass, head down, tail up. An onshore wind made casting difficult, swatting down the backcast. We tracked the fish a few hundred yards from the boat and finally made a cast. The permit lifted its head for a millisecond and glanced at the neutrally buoyant crab fly before turning and taking off. Frustrating, indeed, but beyond cool. We made it back to the boat just as the rain started. The rain felt cool and smelled like the sea.

That evening, we walked the quiet streets of Punta Allen after a delicious skirt steak at the lodge. We checked out the permit sculpture and improvements made to the local area by the fly-fishing community. I think the Mayans really nailed it. This town, this fishery, nestled in between the bay and the sea, is surely a bit of heaven.

ALASKA BY MOTHERSHIP

USING A 56-FOOT BOAT TO FISH UNNAMED STREAMS IN THE ALASKA WILDS FOR SLOB-SIZED STEELHEAD

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BRIAN GROSSENBACHER

Moored in a quiet anchorage, *Adventurous* looks strong and stately as the lone vessel surrounded by Alaska's vibrant coastline. A 56-foot, expedition-style vessel built by Delta Marine and launched in 1994, she was specifically designed for overnight charters in southeast Alaska. *Adventurous* is owned and operated by 54-year-old Travis Peterson and his wife, Jennifer. The operation has built a strong reputation forged from decades of experience taking anglers to Alaska's remote wilderness to put them on the fish of their dreams in a setting that defies imitation.

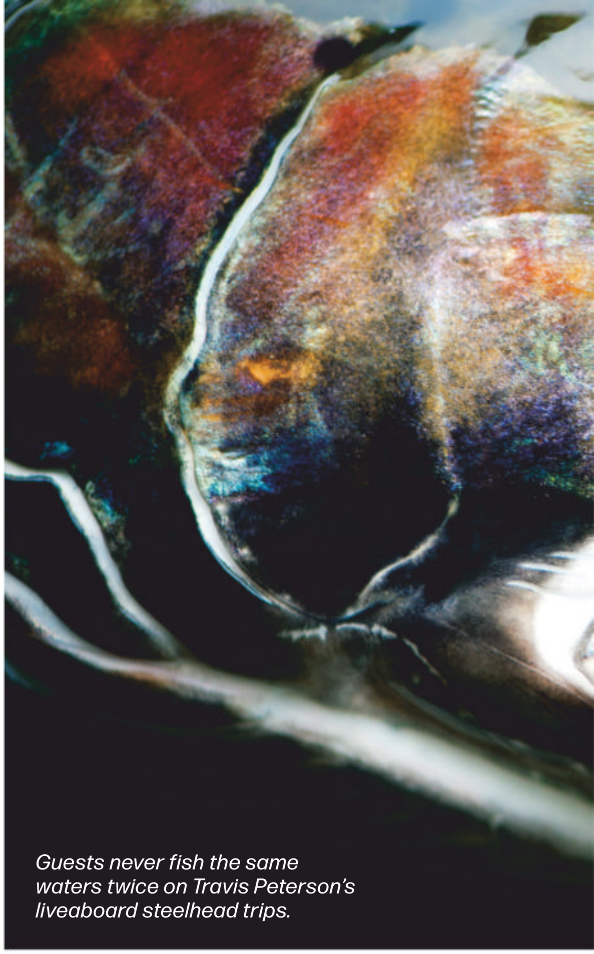
"The size of the vessel is perfect, allowing us to fish on the ocean or tight near coastal bays," Peterson says. "We work with the U.S. Forest Service and have special use permits to fish the coastal streams and shorelines of the Tongass National Forest, the largest national forest in the United States."

Peterson first worked as a mate aboard *Adventurous* in the late 1990s. "I fell in love with the extended-range method of charter fishing," he says, as it shows clients parts of Alaska many visitors never see.

The operation is based out of Sitka, and Peterson explores the inlets, rivers and islands along the Gulf of Alaska coast north through Tongass, an ideal area to target steelhead trout. *Adventurous* is equipped with a 1,500-pound crane on the bow and two jetboats to run anglers up streams and around coastal bays. The big boat stays on anchor as a floating lodge with a galley, three

CREDITS

The operation uses two aluminum boats with jetdrive outboards to fish streams and coastal bays.



Guests never fish the same waters twice on Travis Peterson's liveaboard steelhead trips.

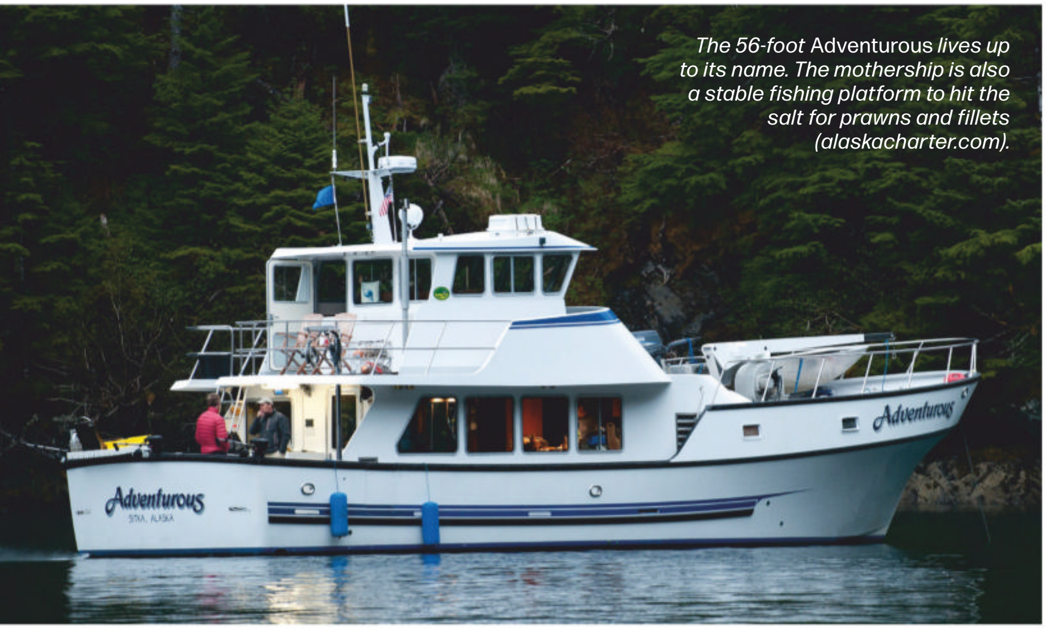
staterooms, all the creature comforts a guest could need and a large cockpit. The trips run five-and-a-half days during steelhead season, from April through late May. "We fish a different remote stream every day, moving between streams and bays in the evenings and early mornings," Peterson says.

Running Rivers

On the days we fished, the team launched the jetboats first thing in the morning, and we'd blast up these unnamed steelhead rivers that were 40 to 50 feet across and up to about 100 feet at the widest point. The jetboats are key to the operation. I took photos of Peterson and his guides running the boats in 4 inches of water. I was literally standing in the water — it wasn't even over my boots — when they cruised by. When we found a spot to fish, we'd beach the boat and wade up the river's edge.

Because the streams are so small, the best method was fishing with switch rods, which are basically compact Spey rods, and swinging when possible. Most of the steelhead were found holding in deeper pools, where the water runs softer. Much of the time, we nymphed for these fish running an egg yarn, though traditional steelheaders thumb their nose at that. I've done this trip twice and been with anglers who can make beautiful Spey casts — they can swing the fly with the best

PHOTO CREDITS


Adventurous
SITKA, ALASKA
Adventurous

The 56-foot Adventurous *lives up to its name. The mothership is also a stable fishing platform to hit the salt for prawns and fillets (alaskacharter.com).*

of them — but on these smaller streams, the best approach is a switch rod and a nymph. It's all river dependent, like anything else.

Finding a spot to fish was part of the fun. We'd poke our head in and check out the water to decide if it was worth the time to run the jetboat upriver as far as we could go, then set off hiking. A lot of times, the fishing was off the hook, and we were into fish for the better part of the day, if not all day. Sometimes we'd hoof it up a river, but the fish weren't there. That's fishing, but at least we were surrounded by an amazing forest. The environment is so pristine. We never saw another person.

These steelhead waters are within a temperate rainforest. The landscape is thick with Sitka spruce, tucked within nearly 17 million acres of old-growth forest. Everything is green and vibrant. And the fishing is insanely good.

Catch of the Day

The food is a key part of the trip. Southeast Alaska is famous for spot prawns that are roughly the size of your hand. We caught them almost every night. Peterson would pull *Adventurous* into protected inlets, and we would set crab or shrimp pots. When we returned from fishing the next day, we'd go check the traps. When you harvest your own food and cook up an amazing meal, it's a perfect recipe for an incredible week.

"Living off of the sea, we have the opportunity to eat some of the best seafood available," Peterson says. "We strive to have intimate meals, especially dinners in remote anchorages with fantastic scenery."

When weather permits, Peterson takes anglers out to deeper water, fishing for lingcod and rockfish, throwing out shrimp traps as he works his way offshore. During summer, Peterson switches gears and focuses more on salt water, pursuing all five species of salmon, as well as halibut, black cod, lingcod and a variety of bottom fish.

On an afternoon of slow fishing, we headed back to the boat and shot clay pigeons off the stern. We had a big time. Peterson can also take guests whale watching. You can spend days following pods of whales. There's never a shortage of things to do, but of course the main event is fishing.

"Sharing the opportunity to explore and adventure in what I think is one of the most spectacular places on Earth is nothing short of amazing," Peterson says. "Still today, after hundreds of trips, I cant wait to get up in the morning and get out on the water."

Wisdom of the Tides

FISHING ONE AREA OVER THE COURSE OF FOUR TIDE CHANGES OPENS THE WINDOW TO A WORLD OF DISCOVERY

BY ANGELO PELUSO

JESSICA HAYDAHL-RICHARDSON PHOTO

"When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hang on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn."

Harriet Beecher Stowe

There is a long-held belief among coastal anglers and baymen that if you don't like the local marine weather, just wait — change is but minutes away. The same could be said of saltwater fishing. The next tide can exasperate the fishing from feast-to-famine, or vice versa.

The bulging of the Earth's waters both toward and away from the moon creates tides. This hydrodynamic phenomenon pushes inward to create high tides, while water pulled in the opposite direction causes outward movement and low tides. The direct linear alignment of the Earth, moon and sun during new and full moon phases creates the strongest tides and currents. These cycles are known as spring tides — the strongest of which are king tides. At the other end of the spectrum are the weaker, neap tides that occur when the gravitational forces of the moon and sun are minimized by their perpendicular orientation to our planet. These tides arise during quarter-moon cycles.

Understanding the interrelationship between tide and current is one of the most important factors for angling success, whether fishing from the surf or from a boat. Tidal changes and the resultant currents influence the movements and feeding behaviors of bait and predatory fish. Fish will transition deeper into intertidal areas on the flood and follow bait with retreating water on the ebb. For example, striped bass and redfish will often move on and off flats with flooding and ebbing tides. Fish will feed deeper into marshes, grass lines, mangroves, harbors and backcountry areas on high water, and move out as the tide falls.

Gamefish naturally gravitate toward areas of current where they can ambush prey. As water rises throughout the intertidal zone to a point where maximum height and coastal penetration occur, the magnitude of that predatory reach is influenced by topography. The opposing ebb tide takes form as water levels recede and fall to the lowest point. Fishing action varies from tide to tide.

Tides also produce currents. While tidal bulges move water vertically, currents move laterally or horizontally. Tidal currents vary depending on the intensity of the tide; wind direction and strength; contour of the coastline; surface and subsurface structure like jetties, rock formations and boulders, channels, troughs; and areas where water funnels and accelerates. Water temperature can also alter current flows. The angler needs to prepare and take advantage of changing circumstances, and the best way to understand the fluctuations is to observe them. I spent a full day fishing all four tide cycles, learning as the waters shifted.

JESSICA HAYDAHL-RICHARDSON

Don't fall victim to "should've been here yesterday" syndrome. Learn to read the fishing signs, and you will find success.

The best way to understand the effects of tide, moon, current and wind is to observe them firsthand.

That four-cycle day took place during late spring, fly-fishing off a Long Island, New York, beach. The outing began two hours into the flood tide. I mapped out a course that looped around a set of beaches and covered approximately three miles of shoreline. The trip down those beaches and back to my starting point enabled me to fish certain zones and areas at different periods of the tide.

One of the most conspicuous reaffirmations was that a particularly good piece of water will most often only hold fish during specific tide-phase windows. Several critical factors contribute to a location's productivity, including the availability of bait, current, time of season, water temperature and the obvious presence of the targeted species. When further examining current, a scenario unfolded highlighting the intensity moving water plays in stimulating bait and the feeding activity of the predatory fish that track such food sources.

One location only yielded fish during two specific current phases: when the current was at peak strength and when that same current slowed to a point where reverse back-eddies formed along portions of that same beach. Equally revealing was that during both instances, the window of opportunity for catching fish lasted no more than 45 minutes. Productive fishing spots do not produce all the time — you have to know when to hit them. An angler who happens

JESSICA HAYDAHL-RICHARDSON (2); SEAN COBELLI (ABOVE)

PHOTO CREDITS

upon a spot like this during an off period might easily conclude that it's a dead zone when, in reality, it transforms into a hot spot under ideal conditions.

The true secret to fishing tidal locations is to understand the interrelationship of the variables and how such factors work in concert to create an environment conducive to catching fish. I have seen anglers walk right past productive beach spots without taking a single cast. Heavily fished areas have no secret spots, just spots that hold secrets.

While many surfcasters take up fixed positions and wait out the tidal changes with the hope of fish swimming by, I prefer to stay on the move, seeking out the fish. This is not simply a serendipitous walk on the beach, but rather one that times my movements and fishing activity in concert with the peak activity at each of my anticipated stops. Although the former method is like sitting in a tree stand when deer hunting, the latter tactic is more akin to still-hunting, where the hunter slowly moves through the woods in search of game. Both methods can be effective, but success depends upon understanding when and why a particular location switches on or off. Equally important is knowing when to sit still and when to move.

I am painfully reminded of a day when I chose to sit at home watching a New York Yankees game rather than joining my friend Chuck Moore for a late-afternoon surfcasting session. It was a hot, summer Sunday, and I figured the beach would be swarming with humanity and heightened boat traffic. I checked the tide chart and was not happy with the stage of the tide. Foolishly, I declined the offer to fish.

My phone rang during the eighth inning. "Hey Ang, meet me at the beach and bring your camera. I got a good one!" My stomach sank. Chuck rarely, if ever, kept a bass — this had to be a very good fish. Indeed, it was, weighing 51 pounds, the largest bass my friend had ever caught from the beach. Chuck knew the area would offer a productive preslack tide that would converge with one last remaining flow of structure-related current. There was a small window to capitalize on the movements and feeding behaviors of any bass in the neighborhood.

His big striper hit at the very end of slack tide among a series of exposed boulders where the slightest of current remained. It required a long cast, but as a former professional baseball pitcher, he could throw a plug a great distance. Following the capture of that trophy striper, we fished the area regularly during similar tides with considerable success. The bass did not bite every time, but when they did, the results were exceptional.

With the assistance of tides, currents and a fishing friend who is a bit of a weather geek, I was able to redeem my decision to stay home and watch the Yankees. I had been catching solid numbers of schoolie striped bass when I got a heads-up that some larger fish had migrated into my region of Long Island Sound. The only problem was an ominous thunderstorm that was fast approaching the central north shore of Long Island.

Having spent considerable time fishing the beaches of this area, I had a strong, intuitive sense there would be a peak opportunity to target an area that previously yielded many productive outings. Getting to that location, however, would require a bit of a hike in some very nasty weather. I'd made that hike many times, but I didn't fancy the idea of being on an isolated beach with a 9-foot lighting rod in hand. I observed the edge of the approaching front and simultaneously made a phone call to a friend.

"Hey, I'm on a local beach, and I need your help."

"What's up?"

"Check your weather apps and tell me how much time I have before that thunderstorm building in Connecticut reaches me."

"You got about an hour-and-a-half."

"OK, thanks. Gotta run. I'll call you later."

Off I went, double-timing my pace. I knew the tide phase would be perfect, with ideal currents. My decision did not disappoint. Although I landed only three stripers on the fly rod, they ranged from 38½ to 42 inches, with the largest weighing 31 pounds. And while I overstayed my weather window, the lightning only began to crack in the skies as I hopped into my truck.

Learning to read the water is akin to learning a language in which you gain a thorough understanding of the environment. With that understanding, you can visualize what is going on beneath the surface with regard to structure and the resulting movements of water and bait. As you walk the surf line, take cues from the sand. The gradient often holds clues to how the land slopes away once it merges with water. Following sloping terrain often leads to a hole or depression that may hold bait within reach of a cast.

At the Lowest Point

Extreme low tides are the best times to explore and obtain a lay of the land. During spring and fall, striped bass move to and from the surf zone. This creates high-productivity periods, and sloping drop-offs or troughs often attract fish.

When it comes to surf-related structure, be aware of anything out of the ordinary along a stretch of beach or backwater. Even a slight bend or depression in the shoreline can be enough of a difference to alter your fishing outcome. Some of the more classic forms of fish-attracting and holding areas include boulder fields, channels, cuts, docks, piers, sunken barges, boats and rock piles. One of my most productive beach spots is a cluster of large, concrete blocks that fell from a barge in the 1930s. Hardly anyone knows they

(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) ANGELO PELUSO; JESSICA HAYDAHL-RICHARDSON; SEAN COBELLI

Spots can turn on and off with a switch of the tide. The trick is to time it just right.

are there, except for the town historian. Take your fishing wisdom from any and all sources.

I've also learned from nature itself. One of my most memorable experiences occurred during an October outing, on the fall run of false albacore. I had been fishing the western reaches of a Long Island beach and was prepared to follow that same pattern on a subsequent trip. My normal routine when approaching a beach is to stand back from the surf line to observe the water conditions before beginning to fish. This tactic confirmed my decision to once again head west. As I began to walk down the beach, a lone seagull flew by, heading east. I turned back to watch the bird and noticed an erratic behavior to its flight that stopped me in my tracks. The gull began diving frenetically to pick harried bait from the surface. Before long, I spotted the first of many albies chasing bay anchovies along the surf line. That seagull knew more than I did. I owed it cheers of gratitude for a wonderful morning of fishing.

Time of day, and how it's tied to seasons and tidal conditions, will help you find fish. The false dawn period to an hour or so after sunrise and the magic time around dusk and sunset is often productive. The period from about 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. has been a great slot for nocturnal-feeding species. But never neglect to fish during the day if your schedule allows. This is especially relevant during early spring and the fall run. Even high noon can be a great time for catching migrating fish on sand or mud flats.

Enter the Moon

Tides are dependent on the moon. New- and full-moon phases each have their advocates. Some anglers fish religiously for two or three days on either side of a new moon, while others ignore the new moon and concentrate their efforts around the big tides of a full moon. Regardless of preference, each moon phase will have a profound impact on the intensity and productivity of tides and the creation of current.

The keen desire to explore will help you become a better angler. Seeking out productive areas works better than staying in one spot, waiting for the fish to turn on. Venture forth to an unfamiliar stretch of beach or backwater, and you might discover your own slice of seclusion. Many factors go into preparing for a day of fishing, and most come with experience and acquired knowledge from time on the water, making your own discoveries and heeding the wisdom of the tides.

LOCALS ONLY

TAKING A LESSON FROM SURF CULTURE TO ENACT A BIT MORE ETIQUETTE ON WESTERN TROUT RIVERS

BY CALLAN WINK
PHOTOS BY STEPHEN COLLECTOR

HYDE
Drift Boats
Pro Series

PHOTO CREDITS

Whether it's guides on a river or surfers on a break, a hierarchy develops over time.

In the 1991 film *Point Break,* actor Keanu Reeves, playing undercover FBI agent Johnny Utah, learns how to surf as a way to infiltrate a gang of bank robber/surfers led by the enigmatic Bhodi, played by Patrick Swayze. Early in the movie, Keanu paddles out, drops in on another surfer and promptly gets assaulted by the guy, a local, who cuts Keanu's leash and sends him packing to the beach. While the leash-cutting part is a bit of Hollywood fantasy — who surfs with a knife? — the altercation is a pretty accurate, if exaggerated, part of surfing. Fittingly, after punching Johnny Utah in the face, the local's parting words are: *Politeness counts, man.*

Etiquette, localism and a longing for days gone by are things I've been thinking about a lot lately as they converge in the seemingly different worlds of trout towns and surf towns. For the past decade, I've split my year into two parts: fishing season from March until November, and surfing season from November until March. As someone who didn't start surfing until well into adulthood, I've come to grips with the fact that I, like Johnny Utah, will never be truly good at it. That being said, as a result of my late start, my stoke couldn't be higher, and I'm still getting better. No lifelong surfer older than 22 can say that. These days, the fishing segment of the year is how I make my living; the surfing part of the year is what I live for. Overall, this system is quite satisfying, if not incredibly lucrative or conducive to long-term relationships.

As someone who bumps back and forth between busy winter surf breaks on the West Coast and busy summer trout streams in southwest Montana, I've noticed numerous similarities between surfing and fly-fishing. Both fly-fishing and surfing are experiencing unprecedented levels of post-Covid interest. Both activities tend to take place in areas with increasing housing unaffordability, brought on in part by a perfect storm of remote workers and an unchecked, short-term vacation rental market. Both activities are often cast, rightly or wrongly, as meditative pursuits, practices if you will, bordering on religion. A regular response I get from people when I tell them I'm a fly-fishing guide is, *That must be so relaxing!* Well, maybe.

Surfing and fly-fishing each provide opportunities for incredible focus and presence within the moment. Whatever you want to call it — achieving the flow state, unfocused focus, zen — a fly angler working a rising trout and a surfer paddling to catch a wave are only thinking about that one precise thing: the wave, the fish. For at least that moment, there is nothing else.

In a world of incessant distraction, these moments of distilled mental and physical engagement are increasingly hard to come by. This fact, I would argue, is a large part of what is driving the surge of interest. While the activities themselves may foster contemplation and moments of zen-like concentration, fly anglers and surfers have something else in common, a general feeling that they're being encroached upon. This feeling of encroachment sometimes leads to outcomes that are decidedly un-zen.

As the number of anglers on Western trout rivers swells, feelings of being encroached upon can simmer and boil over.

Altercations stemming from breaches of etiquette, real or perceived, are common in surfing. Watching a busy break might seem chaotic — surfers paddling this way and that, catching waves, wipeouts, near misses, everything random. In reality, every surf lineup has a hierarchy and functions on a set of fairly universal rules. Failing to adhere to rule No. 1, no dropping in on another surfer already up and riding, is what got Johnny Utah in hot water. Breaches of etiquette aside, certain breaks are legendary for having a hostile culture toward outsiders. This is basic tribalism; we don't know you, you must be bad, so go away.

Localism is a subject that has been debated endlessly in surf culture, and I'm unlikely to add anything novel to that conversation. Like surfing, localism in certain fishing spots is fairly well-documented. Take South Florida, for example. Tom McGuane's classic novel *Ninety-Two in the Shade* is a good primer on the subject. Counter culture castoff Thomas Skelton returns home to Key West and decides to start guiding. In doing so he runs afoul of murderous fishing guide Nicholas Dance. Violence ensues. Jealousy and ownership over fishing spots can be traced all the way back to whenever it was that humans starting fishing — it's nothing new.

With all my years of guiding in Montana, I'd say the fishing culture has been pretty open. Folks are friendly, and the guide community has always been fairly congenial to outsiders, which I was myself at one point, a wide-eyed, clueless kid from Michigan. Over the past few years, I can't help but feel tensions rising in new ways. I've witnessed more altercations at boat ramps and on the water than ever before. Last year, there was a rash of out-of-state tire slashing at parking lots on the Madison. The rivers are busier, of course, with a lot of newcomers buying boats and getting into the game, and — at the risk of sounding crotchety before my time — I've definitely noticed a decrease in adherence to certain standards of river etiquette.

I've been thinking that a busy Western trout stream — say the Missouri, or Madison, or Bighorn in peak summer, drift boats and wade anglers everywhere — functions to some degree like a surf break. It may look like things are happening willy-nilly, but there are rules, unspoken though they might be. One certain way to anger another guide is to pull anchor and start moving directly in front of their boat instead of waiting for them to float by before pulling out. This would be the fly-fishing equivalent to dropping in. In surfing, it's a legitimate safety issue, as collisions can be dangerous. In fly-fishing, it could potentially be a safety issue, but mostly it boils down to respect — not jumping to get ahead of another boat to be the first to drift your fly down a particularly nice-looking bank. Does it matter when your boat is just one of dozens that will fish that run in a day? Probably not. Does it still chap my ass when another recent arrival to Bozeman pulls his anchor 10 yards in front of me and starts fishing as if he didn't see me coming? Yes, yes it does.

Which brings me to a thing surf culture has that is somewhat absent from trout culture: enforcement. Most lineups feature at least one scary local who's built like a linebacker and sits on the outside waiting for sets of waves, occasionally reinforcing proper etiquette. I'm not advocating violence, but politeness still counts, man.

Every year the rivers are busier. Every year it gets more expensive to live in trout towns. Various entities at the state level are pushing for restrictions on commercial use while the number of recreational users continues to grow. Rivers are regulated by costly permit systems, and maybe for good reason; certain outfitters, apparently working on the wholesale model, seem hell-bent on pumping out as many trips as they can possibly book on rivers that every year seem a little more tired. Frustrations are mounting.

I don't know where it's all going, but there is one element that I've gleaned from surfing that I'm attempting to bring to my fishing life. The best surfer in the lineup pretty much never gets in any sort of altercation. A truly talented surfer seems to exist on another plane, where even egregious breaches of etiquette and sheer numbers of clueless surfers in the water are of no consequence. The excellent surfer will always get more than his or her share of waves due to skill and a superior understanding of the nuances of that particular break. Even at a really busy break, a great surfer seems to surf alone. I've noticed the same phenomenon on busy rivers; average guides and do-it-yourself anglers flailing everywhere, and a few consummate professionals with decades of experience on that body of water quietly going about their day, netting fish left and right amid the crowd.

A Cautionary Tale

In every surf town where I've spent time, there's a certain type of guy, usually a middle-aged local, checking the waves every morning with a cup of coffee. He grew up there, as he'll be happy to tell you, but he doesn't surf anymore. Hasn't in years. It's too busy. Kooks from the Valley everywhere. Not even fun anymore. A deep bitterness at the way things have changed. I understand this because this guy exists in trout towns, too. And to be honest, I'm worried that if I'm not careful, I will become him. When I see 50 rigs at a boat launch in July, part of me definitely wants to be that guy, standing there with coffee, looking at the river: *I used to fish before Kevin Costner and the Yellowstone Club and digital nomads in Sprinter vans ruined Montana.*

I'm trying to resist, though, because I know that feelings of this nature contain, at their core, no small degree of hypocrisy. Pretty much everyone has come here from somewhere else. Pissing contests over who's been here the longest are pointless, and when it comes down to it, harboring feelings of bitterness over the way things used to be will do nothing but eat you up. Instead, I'm going to approach it from a different angle. Sure, everyone loves fishing an empty stretch of water, or surfing a deserted break. But you know what's fun as well? Having an audience for your greatness.

I'm going to take a page from the talented surfers I've watched over the years ripping busy California breaks. When the river gets crowded, I'm going to proceed leisurely through the throng. I'll wave at the GoPro-wearing college kids blasting music and fishing for trout with musky streamers; the freshly retired captains of industry with sparkling-new boats and a telltale, splashy nervousness at the oars; the first-year guides barking orders at their clients, loudly, to cover the fact that they haven't caught a fish and aren't entirely sure they know where the takeout is. I'll wish a merry good morning to every boat I see. And while I'm being my pleasant self, I'll do my best to catch the ever-loving hell out of the trout. Because after all, what is the benefit of being a local if you don't put what you've learned to use?

An intimate understanding of a complicated body of water, whether gained from surfing or fishing, can't be bought. It simply can't. To possess that hard-earned knowledge and not put it to use is a great waste, disrespectful to the dreams and ambitions you had as a younger person.

I'm coming to terms with the fact that I'll never be able to afford to buy a house in the town I've called home for 20 years. But I take some small comfort knowing that, on a daily basis, I will damn sure catch more fish than the people who are buying them. It might not be much, but if you're into fishing, as I still am, it will always be something very close to the heart of what actually matters.

Consummate, professional guides quietly go about their business despite the growing crowds.

FABLED TRUTH

THE STRIPED BASS OF CHALEUR BAY BETWEEN QUEBEC AND NEW BRUNSWICK IS A UNIQUE FISHERY YOU WON'T FIND IN THE STATES

By Michael Carr, Photos by Rick Griffiths

Striped bass are flourishing in a place known for Atlantic salmon.

“Standing on the shore, I once more cast my line into the stream, and found the dream to be real and the fable true,” wrote poet Henry David Thoreau in 1864.

When I set off northward to fish for striped bass in Canadian waters, I felt a bit like Thoreau walking into the Maine woods. I was one of the “curious… [on] the verge of a primitive forest, more interesting perhaps, on all accounts, than [going] a thousand miles westward.” My destination, though, was not Mount Katahdin. I was heading across the border through the vast logging country of New Brunswick to the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec and a little town called Cascapédia-Saint-Jules. I was driving toward some of the greatest Atlantic salmon rivers in the world, but I had no interest in salmon. I’d be targeting striped bass from a flats skiff with Andrew Murphy, of Gaspé Coastal outfitters.

The earliest recordings of striped bass in this region of Quebec date back to the 1840s, but by the middle of the 19th century, they were nearly fished to extinction. This was around the time the region became a hotbed for Atlantic salmon. Through much of the 20th century, striped bass in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence were nearly forgotten. In the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans determined that Chaleur Bay stripers are genetically identical to fish from farther south in the Miramichi River, but this stock was completely different from the stocks in the St. Lawrence River and Bay of Fundy.

The Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans set a moratorium on all fishing — commercial and recreational — shortly after the study, and the bass population began to rebound despite nearly two centuries of neglect. In 2013, the fishery reopened, and anglers realized that not only had the stripers bounced back, they were thriving. Chaleur Bay, with plenty of forage and oxygen-rich water, helped striped bass flourish. It was only a matter of time before someone turned their attention away from salmon and toward stripers. That person was Andrew Murphy.

While striped bass have lived in Chaleur Bay for centuries, the fishing is just starting to hit its stride.

Poling skiffs are used to sneak up on finning stripers in shallow water.

ACROSS THE BORDER

At the Canadian border, I pulled in to a booth with my passport ready.

"Where's home?" the guard asked.

"New Jersey," I replied.

"Long way from home. What brings you to Canada?"

"Striped bass," I said with a smile.

"Oh, you headed up to the Gaspé then?"

"Yes. Cascapédia-Saint-Jules."

"Friend of mine and I were up there a short time ago," he said, recounting a spin-fishing trip with so much catching that they got bored.

I bid him adieu, knowing how poor my French is, and headed north on the Trans-Canada Highway into the heart of New Brunswick. The bridge across Chaleur Bay reveals the rugged beauty of the Gaspé. Green mountains rise in the distance, and the bay stretches as far as the eye can see to the east and up into the St. Lawrence to the west. Route 132 carried me through Oak Bay, Pointe-à-la-Garde, Fleurant and Carleton-sur-mer until I arrived at the mouth of the famed Cascapédia River. I got a text from Andrew Murphy as I took a hard left away from the coast toward the mountains and the hamlet of Cascapédia-Saint-Jules: *Half hour behind you. You're staying above the garage. Make yourself at home.*

When I arrived, I was greeted by André-Philippe Losier. "You're meeting Andrew, then? Oh, I remember him saying that you were coming," said Losier, whom I'd come to call AP, shaking my hand. Like all of the crew I'd meet in Murphy's orbit, Losier is a hearty man with a strong, calloused, grip.

Murphy arrived shortly after. He's tall with sandy hair and a kind smile. He's 29 but an old soul, world-weary, yet easy to talk to and laugh with. The dogs came next, a veritable wolf pack that emerged from the house and trailer next door. Then I met Jean-Philippe Desjardins, another guide, and the three of them spoke in breakneck French as they hosed down the Biscayne Boatworks skiffs that had just come off the water. I got used to understanding very little of what they said, other than a smattering of French words I know, such as *merde* and *poutine.* I marveled at how these Quebecois bounce from French to English and back again in the same breath.

They showed me rods and flies as they spoke about finning stripers, sunning stripers, tailing stripers, caught stripers and released stripers. It was then that my New Jerseyan skepticism kicked in. There is a natural inclination that we sons and daughters of the Garden State possess: We think everyone is full of *merde.*

When Sarah Nellis, Murphy's fiancée and business partner, arrived home after a day chasing salmon, we began supper. Nellis, a native Gaspesian, told me of their plans for the lodge, which was under construction. She supervised the pouring of the foundation while Murphy and I were on the water the next day.

Thanks to a partnership with Kyle Schaefer of Soul Fly Outfitters in Maine and the Bahamas, Murphy and Nellis were able to purchase the Nadeau House, one of the oldest in Cascapédia-Saint-Jules. The house was built at the turn of the 20th century after the Nadeau family's success in logging. The lodge will hold eight guests and offer high-end accommodations and food on par with any of the salmon lodges in

Not all of the stripers up North are big, but the abundance of schoolies provides hope for the future.

the area. Anglers will have the option of chasing stripers on the flats or salmon in the rivers. Schaefer met Murphy at a fly show and once Schaefer saw the area for himself, he decided to partner. The professional relationship is going on four years, and the lodge is on pace to open in the spring of 2025, one week after Nellis and Murphy marry.

I was enthralled by this land and these people, and I hadn't even made a cast. I went to sleep that night thinking that even if we caught no fish, the drive had been well worth it.

REELING IT IN

There are no boat launches in this part of Chaleur Bay. The only other boats that patrol these waters are the commercial lobster fleet. "The seafloor is carpeted with lobsters. They're just everywhere," Murphy says. He launches from various access points up and down the coast, and this day we were on a stretch of beach that's a short drive from his house.

I had taken my spot with Murphy, and Losier had a client in the second Gaspé Coastal boat. We ran across the bay for about a half-hour toward New Brunswick, and as he cut the engine, we pulled around the leeward side of an island within sight of the mainland. He pointed to the clear water. Stripers.

The boat had spooked a school, though not the sporadic wolf pack I was used to from other flats trips. This was a school of 60 or so fish that scattered in all directions when we slid to a stop. Murphy climbed atop the poling platform and began to maneuver through the shallows. The bottom is sandy, but there were large patches of eel grass every couple of yards. I could see crabs scurrying on the bottom. Murphy told me that grass shrimp were the preferred meal for these fish and that little Clousers and epoxy shrimp will always get an eat.

"You got line stripped out and ready to go?" he asked, scanning the horizon. I was so gobsmacked by the fish we had just seen that I struggled to get the rod ready. "Fish coming at eleven."

We had been on the flat for 30 seconds. I dropped the tiny Clouser just where he said. Fish on. It was a schoolie, maybe 25 inches. My first Canadian striper.

"Let's do it again," Murphy said.

We spent the better part of the morning patrolling the flat. We caught more fish than I can remember. A fish on every other cast. Most were feisty schoolies, but there were some 30-inchers in the mix. Murphy explained that the fish are still young in striper terms. I can only imagine what this flat will look like in five years, once these prolific spawns continue.

On the windward side of the island, I climbed onto the platform,

No trip to this part of the world is complete without a poutine pit stop.

determined to pole Murphy to a fish, since he had just spent two hours allowing me to catch every fish on the flat. After getting my sea legs and spinning the boat in a circle, I finally got my groove and maneuvered into the channel he had pointed out. He wanted me to keep the boat between the light and dark patches of grass that create a roadway of sorts down the flat. It was easy poling, even for a novice like me, and when a school emerged from the dark water, I called out to Murphy, who made the shot with ease. That was my proudest moment of the trip.

After three hours, one thing became abundantly clear: These people are not full of *merde*. This is a world-class fishery. And the day had only just begun. “Jump out here, and we’ll wet-wade for a bit,” Murphy said after we made the run back to the Quebec side of the bay.

My sun-scorched feet hit the water and a shot of adrenaline ran through me. The cold, clear water was invigorating. A few steps from the staked-out skiff, Murphy pointed his rod at a mass of fish 50 yards ahead. I watched him cast and followed suit. We were instantly doubled up. These fish were hungry and active. Cast a fly in their general direction, and they would eat. Wave after wave of fish washed over the flat. The truth of this place is far more exciting than the myth. How could I be standing on a sand flat in Chaleur Bay with mountains to my right and striped bass swimming all around me?

When we couldn’t take it anymore, when it was just too many fish, we sat at a fry shack and ate *poutine*. The cheese curds squeaked as we ate them, which Murphy said is how you know they’re fresh. We then went up the road to the Bujolds, a father-and-son fishing enterprise that specializes in shellfish. In the garage, two giant chests of ice were opened to reveal fresh mussels. The previous night, Murphy and I had talked about how much we both love mussels. I shared my recipe for fra diavolo sauce, and he told me about his family’s secret beurre blanc. “We’ll do mussels, two ways tonight,” he said.

As we cooked, drank white wine and laughed, I wondered whether I should actually write about this place. The people are so kind and the fishing so good that I hesitate to think what might happen if too many anglers try to force this round peg into whatever shaped hole they’re missing in themselves.

I asked everyone around the table, a heaping bowl of discarded mussel shells in front of us, what they wanted me to tell about their home waters. “Just tell the truth,” Murphy said.

The time I spent with Andrew Murphy in Chaleur Bay were the two best days of striped bass fishing I’ve ever had. That’s the truth. If you don’t believe me, that’s fine. Maybe it’s better if you don’t. Or, go see for yourself.

MICHAEL CARR (ABOVE LEFT)

Life on the Edge

GLOBETROTTING FLY FISHERMAN AND PHOTOGRAPHER PAT FORD HAS NEVER LOST HIS THIRST FOR ADVENTURE

BY WILLIAM SISSON
PHOTOS BY PAT FORD

Mahi, sea lions and boobies work a school of sardines in the Galapagos Islands.

Ford says fighting a blue marlin on the fly is for him the pinnacle of fly-fishing. (Right) This tiger shark's interest in the diver gave Ford second thoughts about swimming with sharks.

The scene could have been ripped from a Hemingway story.

On a seamount more than 100 miles off Costa Rica, a white-haired salt stood in the cockpit fighting a blue marlin on a fly rod. The battle was as mano-a-mano as it gets in this theater. A 300-pound marlin, 20-pound tippet and a 75-year-old Don Quixote with a 14-weight rod.

What could go wrong?

One hour became two, and the powerful fish still hadn't jumped. Instead, it rested far below with its pectoral fins extended horizontally. It's message: *Make me move, old man.* After two hours, the experienced angler was wearying; he'd put as much pressure on the fish as he'd ever put on anything — and still it wouldn't rise.

The fish had ripped off a quarter-mile of line and backing on its first run. Given the resistance of that much line in the water and the gossamer-like, 20-pound tippet, the drag was set at less than 2 pounds. The veteran angler carefully palmed the reel to increase drag to 4 pounds and pumped. Nada. He reduced the drag to almost nothing. Still the fish wouldn't budge. Most of the line he got back was the result of Capt. Chris Sheeder's skillful boat handling, which changed the angle of pressure exerted on the great fish. Sheeder, who had caught more than 35,000 billfish, put his old friend in the best position to win the battle. (Sheeder passed away in 2021.)

Sometime during the second hour, the marlin came to within 30 feet of the surface — then headed back down. In the third hour, the constant pressure from the stoic angler finally paid dividends; the tired man worked the fish closer and closer to the surface through a series of short pumps designed to keep the marlin's head up, a technique he'd learned fighting tuna on the fly. The mate finally grabbed the leader, and the catch was official. The blue marlin, estimated to weigh more than 300 pounds, was released.

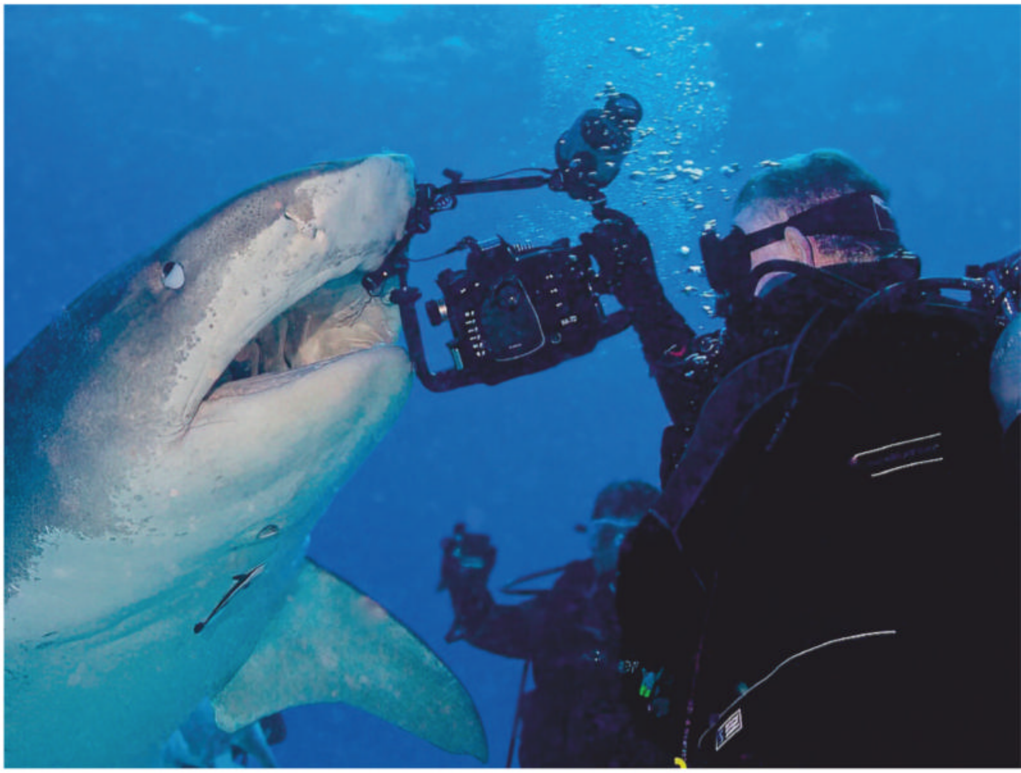
Happy and exhausted, the fisherman, Pat Ford, slumped. "He was pretty broken, but he's a tough cat," says Rufus Wakeman, a friend and skilled angler who had fought and released a 200-plus-pound marlin on fly the previous day. "He's a tough little bugger."

Indomitable

Ford has never been someone to count out. "I've caught a lot of good fish in my life … but nothing will top that blue marlin," Ford says. "I was amazed by the speed and violence of the marlin."

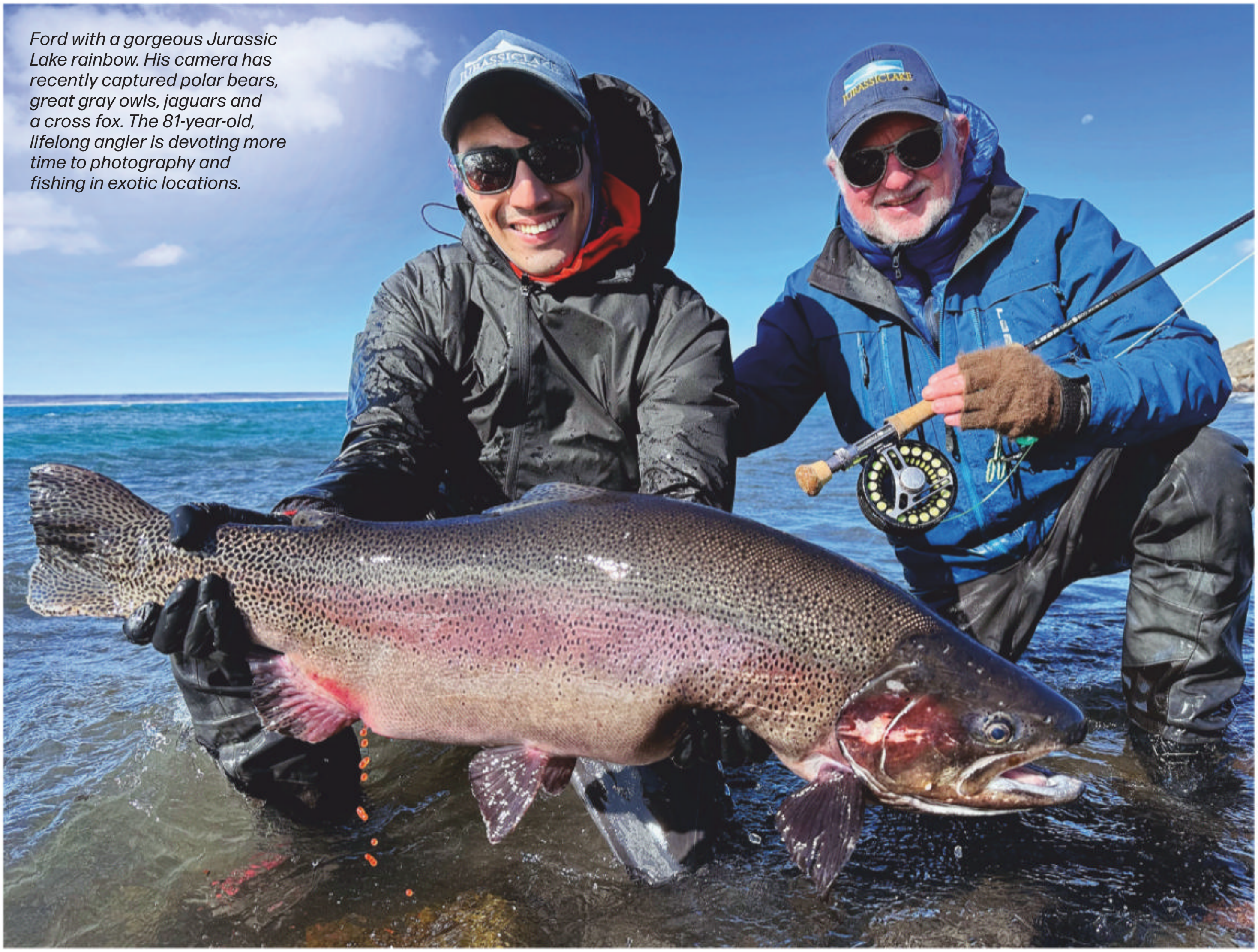
In Ford's estimation, wrestling a blue marlin on a fly rod is the Super Bowl of fly-fishing. "There is nothing harder than catching a blue marlin on a fly rod with a 20-pound tippet," says Ford, whose photos and stories are likely familiar to anyone who reads this magazine. It was the kind of struggle that Hemingway would have understood, approved and likely participated in.

Ford remains a spry and youthful 81-year-old. He can a cast a fly into 40 knots of wind all day, shoot photos for hours and move with the energy of a much younger man. He did just that in Argentina last October. "Just watch Pat," exclaims his friend Rodger Glaspey, co-owner of the Rainbow King Lodge on Lake Iliamna in Alaska. "He has not slowed down. He keeps acting like a 65-year-old. You can't keep him down. He bounces right back up."

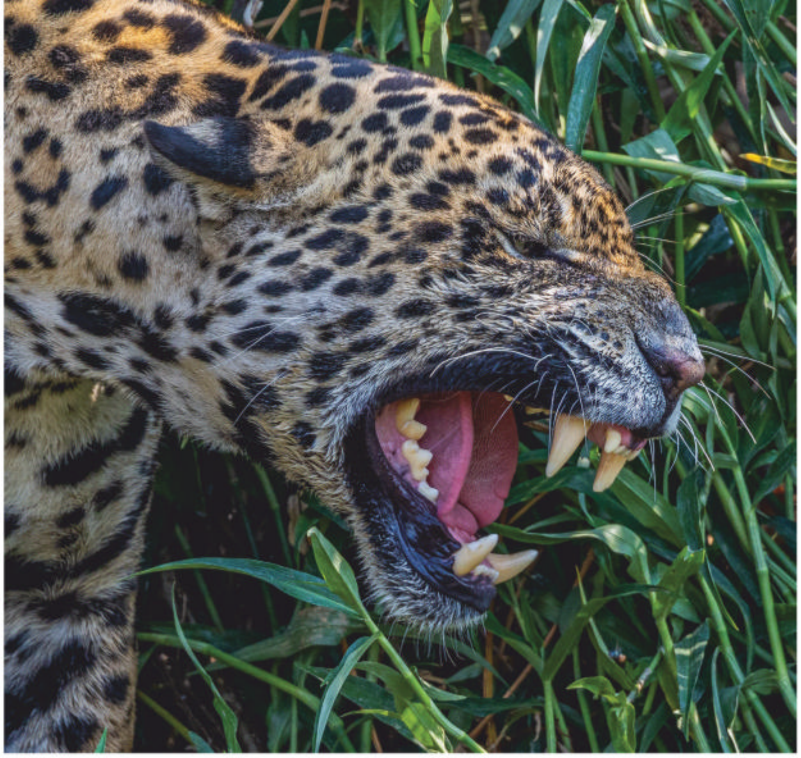


Ford wears a closely trimmed, white beard and mustache, and brushes his silver hair back. Dressed in a fishing shirt and shorts, he looks every bit the North American representative for the International Game Fish Association that he is. Ford can speak with polish and poise when necessary, and he can talk the rough language of anglers and guides gathered in remote lodges around the world.

A former Miami trial lawyer, Ford is a quick-thinking Alpha in the trim frame of a middleweight. He carries himself into any room or fishing camp with gravitas and confidence. Wherever he is, Ford embodies the stature of a host, not a guest, Glaspey says. He is also


JURASSICLAKE
JURASSICLAKE

Ford with a gorgeous Jurassic Lake rainbow. His camera has recently captured polar bears, great gray owls, jaguars and a cross fox. The 81-year-old, lifelong angler is devoting more time to photography and fishing in exotic locations.



blessed with what is known as old-man strength, as evidenced by a trip last year to the Galapagos.

"I took two striped marlin, back to back, each over 200 pounds, on the fly in the Galapagos at 80 years old," says Ford, who mentions the catch not as a humblebrag but rather as an achievement he is especially proud of. "I don't know anyone else who's done that."

Ford stays in shape by walking and occasionally visiting the gym, but he tires easily of workout routines. He's easily bored, which is one reason he's constantly on the move. "I've fished with Pat from the Seychelles to Africa, from Bolivia to Brazil to the Dominican Republic. Bermuda, the Bahamas, Key West and the Galapagos," says Wakeman, a skilled 62-year-old fly angler and world-record holder who runs a fish camp and cottages on the Indian River in Florida. "He's great to travel with. He's entertaining and confident. And he's strong. He carries his own stuff."

Ford has held more than two dozen IGFA world records, some of which still stand. Forty years ago this March, he landed a 67-pound, 4-ounce cobia on 8-pound tippet with longtime friend and Key West guide Capt. Robert "R.T." Trosset, with whom he's fished hundreds of days. "That record will never be broken because there aren't many 70-pound cobia around," Ford says. "And if someone spots one, they're not going to toss a fly at it. And they're certainly not going to use 8-pound tippet."

Ford and Trosset met in Key West in the 1970s, when the fishing was off the charts. "We've had some great times together," says Trosset, who at 72 is the respected elder statesmen of Key West guides. "A lot of the stuff I learned was through Pat. He was always trying something different."

Trosset follows Ford's various fishing and photography adventures from afar, as do many of his friends. "Look at what he does now," Trosset says. "He has the same tenacity as he did when we first started fishing."

One would think Ford would be slowing down, but he shrugs off such talk. "I'm 81 years old, and I don't feel any different than when I was 60," he says.

Early Key West

Ford's road to Key West was as serendipitous as it was unlikely. The son and grandson of lawyers, Ford grew up in northern New Jersey and graduated from Notre Dame in 1965 with a degree in journalism. He then attended Columbia Law school. The Vietnam War was raging at the time, and social upheaval tore the country from coast to coast. During Ford's last year at Columbia in 1968, war protests closed the campus for the last six weeks of classes. Ford, who's fished since boyhood, spent most of that time fishing streams an hour north of New York City.

Ford says his biggest break occurred when he joined the Navy and got accepted into the JAG (Judge Advocate General) Corps. He was sent to Pensacola, Florida, where the fishing was very good. "A lot better than Vietnam," he reflects.

At the time, Ford recalls, "Key West was like the end of the earth." No one wanted to be posted there unless, perhaps, they fished. He let it be known to his superiors that he was open to an assignment there. After a year-and-half in Pensacola, Ford got his wish. He was made the legal affairs officer for the Naval Air Station and a military judge. Two of this four children were born in Key West.

He arrived at the southern outpost in January 1971, before the advent of Loran-C and early enough to capture the best of the reef and wreck fishing. He purchased a 17-foot skiff powered by an 85-hp Evinrude for $2,500. Ford was one of the handful of anglers and guides who navigated to wrecks by dead reckoning — running a prescribed compass heading at a specific rpm for an allotted time. The sharpies relied on calibrated Danforth Constellation compasses and stopwatches. "If you found one wreck, it was like dying and going to heaven," he says. "It was unbelievable. Just magic. There was never anyone on those wrecks. And the fishing down there was unbelievable."

Once you got close to a wreck, you slowed the boat and searched for it on sonar. "There would be 50 cobia following in your prop wash while you were looking for the wreck. We used to think that jigging 50-pound amberjack on 12-pound mono in 250-feet of water was fun," he says.

It was a great laboratory for the likes of Ford and Trosset, who drove innovations in tackle and techniques, and benefited from the advances in boats, motors, sonar and more that followed. With the advent of Loran-C, both men became adept at getting "hang numbers" from shrimpers. The Loran numbers marked wrecks and other high spots that the commercial guys wanted to avoid since they'd foul their nets. They were solid gold for rod-and-reelers. "He's one of the

Ford spends part of each year in Alaska, fishing and photographing wildlife. He and R. T. Trosset (below) have been friends for more than 50 years. This 8-pound-tippet, world-record cobia weighed 67 pounds, 4 ounces and may outlast both men.

old-timey guys who was there in the ’70s, when all this stuff was happening,” Wakeman says.

Ford has long been a figure in South Florida light-tackle circles. He chaired the Golden Fly Tarpon Tournament for 13 years and is a founding member of the Tarpon & Bonefish Trust.

Photography

In life, as in fishing, Ford has managed to evolve with changing times. As Wakeman presciently observes: “Pat’s probably happiest with a fly rod or a camera in his hands. These days it just might be a camera.”

“I’ve caught all the fish I need to catch,” Ford told me last fall as we sat in the kitchen of his Miami home, waiting for Hurricane Milton to pass before flying to Jurassic Lake in Argentina to fish for big rainbows. “I’m really phasing out of the fishing and into photography.”

Part of the shift has to do with the declines in his Florida home waters. “The fishing is not as good as it was 10, 20 or 30 years ago,” Ford says. “I really saw the best of it.” The long perspective is both a blessing and a curse for those like Ford, who have experienced the very best a place has to offer and are now witness to its decline.

Ford’s solution is travel to places where the fishing is still unparalleled, be it Argentina, Alaska or Timbuktu. “It’s all got to do with action,” he says. “I don’t have to catch another tarpon, but I want to capture the best action photo of a tarpon.”

Ford started his own law practice in January 1975, which specialized in suing nursing homes over elder abuse. He says it’s still the leading firm in Florida in that field. He stopped practicing full time in 2009, when he turned 65. Burned out, he sold the firm to two of his partners, who have kept his name on the practice. Was he good?

“Oh yeah,” he says.

Florida fishing legend Stu Apte has been friends with Ford for years. Once, when Apte was having a problem with his mother and a nursing home, he let it be known that Ford was his lawyer and a close friend. The problem disappeared. “You mention Pat’s name, and they shrivel up,” says Apte, who turns 95 in May and figures he’s fished with Ford more than 100 times. “He’s a great fly fisherman and a great attorney. He’s one good man. And I can tell you, you always want him on your side.”

Ford lives in what one guide called “the world’s biggest man cave.” His home in Miami is steps from a lake brimming with peacock and largemouth bass. The walls are decorated with art, fish photographs, world record certificates, and shots of grown children and grandkids. (Ford is a divorced father of three daughters and a son.) “The whole house is filled with memorabilia,” Ford says.

Traveling Man

Ford intends to continue traveling, fishing and taking photos for as long as he can. “I still like to travel to exotic fishing spots,” he says. His 2025 plans are not yet complete but include a trip to Uruguay in January to fish for golden dorado, one to Yellowstone National Park in February to photograph wolves, then a jaunt to Punta Arenas, Chile, in March to

IGFA World Recor
8# Tippet
MARCH 5, 1985
67Lbs 4oz

take pictures of pumas. He'll be focusing on bald eagles in Vancouver in June and traveling to Iceland in July. September is Ford's time for Alaska.

Then he'll head back to Jurassic Lake Lodge in Argentina, where he has an annual reservation for the second week in October until he can no longer fish or take photos. He also includes blank spots on his calendar that he intends to fill with even more travel. “Life is lived forward, and Pat is trying to capture the adventure of life as he moves through it,” says Glaspey, who first learned of Ford after seeing his Alaska photos displayed on the walls of his lodge when he bought it. “That's what he's trying to do with his lenses.”

Ford's interest in picture-taking dates to his undergraduate days at Notre Dame. In the summer of his freshman year, he bought his first camera, a Pentax with a 135-mm telephoto lens, to shoot Fighting Irish football from the sidelines. He was paid $1.50 for each published photo. “I didn't have any training, but I've been there for the rest of my life. I love to shoot football,” says Ford, who prowls the sidelines shooting photos of the Miami Dolphins, the University of Miami Hurricanes and Orange Bowl games. “I like the action. It's super-exciting to be down on the field. It's like fishing; you're always learning.”

Today, Ford shoots a Canon EOS R5 Mark II mirrorless camera, which takes 50-megapixel photos at a rate of 30 frames per second. Photography poses similar challenges to fishing, says Ford, whose fishing photos have appeared on more than 300 magazine covers. “You have to find the animal, and you need to photograph it doing something interesting,” he says. That might be an eagle diving on a fish, a bear pouncing on a sockeye or two young jaguars playfully cuffing one another.

The similarities between his two passions include a deep understanding of the equipment and a lot of time in the field. “It has to be second nature … on the instinctual level,” Ford says. “With photography, you need to know your camera, and you need to practice. The rule of thumb is your first 10,000 photos are going to suck.” Ford has written two books and also provided photographs and copy for Andy Mill's opus, *A Passion for Tarpon.*

Adventure-Seeker

Like a Formula One driver, stunt pilot or mountaineer, Ford is a calculated risk-taker who has more than demonstrated his macho bona fides. An adrenaline junkie, he says he doesn't like to be bored. He's dived numerous times with tiger sharks off the West End of Grand Bahama. There's a video showing a tiger and a hammerhead shark taking more than a casual interest in Ford, which created a few anxious moments for both the photographer and the divemaster. He says he's probably done with shark diving, which would put several of his friends at ease.

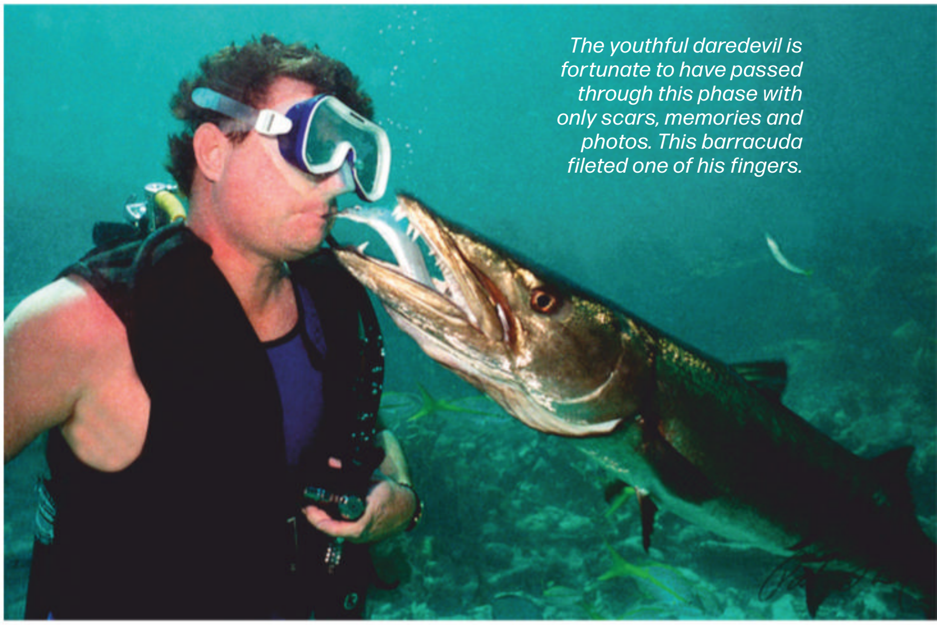
Photos from 1986 show Ford feeding ballyhoo to a large barracuda named Smokey in Pennekamp State Park in the Keys. When Ford fiddled with a bait too long to correct an awkward grasp on it, he nearly lost a finger. The cuda grabbed a little more than the fish. “It completely filleted the index finger on my right hand,” Ford says. Like most daredevils, he blames himself, not the fish. He also realizes that the 50-pound barracuda could have removed his hand with a single bite and caused him to bleed out before reaching the boat, which was anchored a quarter-mile away.

While fishing on the Zambezi River in 1999 for tigerfish in the south-central African country of Zambia, Ford had yet another close call. He was standing near the transom when a hippo engulfed the small outboard in its enormous mouth, tipping the small boat and pitching Ford into the river. Hippos kill about 500 people a year in Africa and are far more territorial in the water than on land. The guide, who quickly hauled him back on board told Ford: “A hippo bit my grandfather in half last month.”

Ford set a tigerfish, 12-pound tippet world record on that trip — it weighed 14 pounds, 8 ounces. The fish may be forgotten by now, but the hippo story still has legs. “There are so many times, I should have been dead,” he says.

Still not Dead

Ford holds a stoical, cool-headed attitude toward life's unpredictability, as demonstrated in his fondness for the Willy Nelson song lyric: “I woke up still not dead again today.” Ford founded the Woke Up Still Not Dead Club after nearly cashing in his chips in 2014. He awoke one early morning in excruciating pain from pancreatitis. Complications followed, including a MRSA infection. He spent 47 days in and out of a hospital and underwent numerous invasive procedures. He lost 55 pounds, and one doctor confided that he didn't think Ford would survive. When he was finally back on his feet, he spoke of “savoring every minute, every day on the water, every fishing trip, every photo. Can't put things off until tomorrow anymore.”



The youthful daredevil is fortunate to have passed through this phase with only scars, memories and photos. This barracuda fileted one of his fingers.

Ford's favorite photo subject for years has been Alaska grizzlies. He loves September at Rainbow King Lodge, when big rainbows move out of the lake and into the streams to fatten on sockeye eggs and flesh. Brown bears that fish, love sockeyes. “That means rivers with the most sockeyes also have the most rainbows — and the most bears. The perfect combination,” according to Ford. “If there are bears around, I spend more time with my camera in hand than my fly rod.”

He knows how to act in bear country and has avoided missteps that could lead to trouble. “He has an insatiable appetite for adventure,” Glaspey says. “He has this desire to be on the edge, gazing at something new that interests him. He's got the wanderlust in him. And he's always inquisitive.”

Ford also loves photographing raptors — eagles, hawks and other birds of prey. “I especially like the owls; they have so much personality,” he says.

He doesn't expect to make money on his nature photography, but that's not his motivation. “What good are photos if you don't share them with people?” asks Ford, who posts his work regularly on social media. “If you can brighten up someone's day, it's all worth it.”

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BETWEEN FISH

By William Sisson

TOM LYNCH

A Glimpse of Eternity

My hands were a mess — cut, nicked and sore from fishing more than eight hours a day. I had fallen three times, once fording a river swollen with snow melt. My face was burned from sun and wind. My lips were cracked. And I'd stood waist-deep in knee-knocking cold water for hours, casting in winds gusting into the 50s.

It is a gift from the gods to fish yourself into such a happy, dazed state of exhaustion — spent, emptied and bone-tired — that you stumble around like you're tipsy when the fishing ends at dusk. Our physical exertions spent in pursuing enormous rainbow trout left all of us feeling alive — with our hair tingling and our flagons spilling over the brim.

For seven days last October, I fished with eight others at Jurassic Lake, a large Patagonian desert sink lake in southern Argentina. Conditions were tough, but the big rainbows were more than willing.This was my second trip to Jurassic Lake Fishing Lodge and Lago Strobel. We fished a wind-scoured land so ancient as to evoke Earth before humankind ran roughshod over its woods and waters.

The jumble of basalt rocks and boulders suggest a lunar landscape, but that description misses much. It is sparce and rugged, yet beautiful in its austerity. The lake is turquoise, and when wind gusts approach 60 mph, small williwaws, or white squalls, race down the lake. The blasts awaken Lago Strobel, summon her trout and contribute to otherworldly afternoon skies with fantastic cloud shapes.

Jurassic Lake is not easy to reach, and its conditions are demanding, but that's part of the attraction. Power and poignancy often accompany trying journeys. After the long slog involved in getting to Jurassic, the fishing can sometimes feel like shooting trout in a barrel. On the right beat, at the right time, an angler can seemingly take one trout after another. Anglers certainly manage 50-plus-fish days. Some swear they caught 100. The flies are all barbless, and all fish are released.

The fishing ranges from easy to challenging, depending on wind strength, direction, beat and the usual intangibles. At times, you have to work hard to get a take. The wind is usually angled on your left arm, a boon to right-handed casters. When it gusts strongly right in your face, you need to maintain a sense of humor while you flail.

Distance translates into more takes in this windy section of the world, so the stronger your casting and double-haul, the more likely you are to bend a rod. I fished an 8-weight with a floating, weight-forward, 9-weight line, which was well-suited for the fish and conditions.

We rotated around four beats, which shift between morning and afternoon. Three lie along the lake, with one to the left side and one to the right of the mouth of the Barrancoso River, true north for the thousands of rainbows drawn to their natal spawning flow. Those two beats and a third — a large pool about midway up the lower section called the "Aquarium" — were steady producers. The Aquarium was on fire, as was the right side of the river.

One evening, I was the last one fishing the lake. I was cold but catching steadily, working my way down the shore toward the river mouth. I was stripping an olive-colored, balanced leach with a small orange scud trailing behind. Waves were 2 to 3 feet and building behind the powerful gusts. Waves broke in front of me, others on me, and the rest behind where I was standing. Their menacing looks notwithstanding, the short fetch made them powder-puffs compared with ocean waves, but they stir up scuds along the edge of the lake; and the trout feed more aggressively when the wind blows the cap off your head.

I fished with focus, intent on not missing a grab. Persistent casting and slow stripping kept me in the action. The hem of the lake for 20 to 30 feet is rocky and slippery. Beyond that lies a drop-off marked by blue water. Trout cruise that edge and even the knee-deep shallows at times. On one retrieve, I snagged what felt like a boulder. I immediately tried roll-casting to free my fly. Suddenly, the boulder started swimming. It was a 7- to 8-pound trout.

A member of our group, John Timura, turned 81 at Jurassic and caught the largest trout, a fatty that easily topped the 20-pound mark. It was the only fish all week to do so. My largest was 17 pounds. Most of us dropped larger fish.

I will long remember those moments when the white sun was an eye-watering, blinding spotlight, the lake a crinkled sheet of silver. I had a rainbow jump twice under those bedazzling conditions, and I thought for a moment that I had caught a glimpse of eternity.

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